

VISION

OF TOMORROW

APRIL 5-



**INTO
THE
UNKNOWN**
John Russell Fearn

HARDY

VISION OF TOMORROW

Editor:
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illustrating '*Jupiter from Callisto*'

THINGS TO COME . . .



Man meets a truly alien life form—with bizarre and horrifying consequences! Peter Cave's exciting *LOST IN TRANSLATION* is featured in our May issue, on sale May 1st. Other great stories by Ken Bulmer, K. W. Eaton, Philip E. High, J. R. Fearn, Lee Harding and others, plus all our usual features.

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EDITORIAL

*"Something old,
something new"*

One of the more gratifying things since we began publication has been the reader response to our historical feature, THE IMPATIENT DREAMERS. Older readers are waxing nostalgic, whilst newcomers are being agreeably surprised at the extensive antecedence British science fiction—in magazine form—actually has.

The originator of the series, Walter Gillings, has been carrying out a fantastic amount of research in order to present the full story. As a direct result of this research we of VISION OF TOMORROW are able to present something unexpected which we hope will again please a wide range of our readership.

When the war and paper shortage curtailed production of his pioneer sf magazine TALES OF WONDER, Gillings was left with a number of mss. which he had accepted for subsequent publication. At first he retained the stories just on the off-chance that publication might be resumed. Meanwhile he invited authors to ask for their mss. back at any time, should they have a chance of placing them elsewhere. Gradually the pile of unused stories diminished, but quite a few remained when Gillings himself was called to arms. He stored them safely away amongst the fantastic collection of sf publications and correspondence he had amassed over a decade of dedicated activity in the field.

The war ended, but unhappily TALES OF WONDER was never revived, and the pile of mss. remained undisturbed, all but forgotten. Until recently, that is, when Walter began turning out his entire file of the year 1942, researching for this issue's instalment of THE IMPATIENT DREAMERS. Then the discovery was made—an original novelette by John Russell Fearn, one of the leading writers of the day, was amongst the unpublished material.

Gillings promptly turned over the mss. to your editor, who in turn contacted Mr. Fearn's widow. Mrs. Fearn

very kindly gave us permission to print the story, INTO THE UNKNOWN, which we present in this issue with some stunning Eddie Jones illustration. Nor does its presentation infringe on our current policy of presenting new stories only, as it has never been previously published. Its presentation now affords a unique adjunct to our historical series, giving as nothing else could an authentic glimpse into a bygone golden age of British science fiction.

Also in this issue we begin presentation of a unique science fact series about the solar system. It is unique in that the series is being both written and illustrated on the cover by the same man, David A. Hardy. The initial feature deals with the moons of Jupiter, and the next one deals with the so-called 'Hell Planet,' Mercury. It is planned to continue the series, to embrace the whole solar system. We invite your reactions and suggestions for the future development of this series, which we believe has intriguing possibilities.

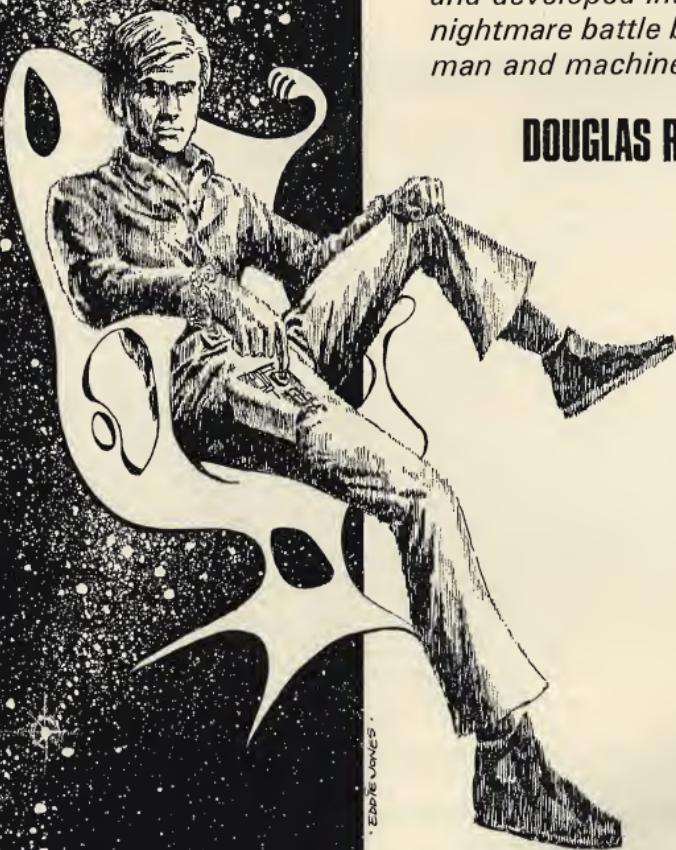
Reader participation is something which we have always encouraged. A large readership can ensure our continued publication, certainly, but it is only with a *vocal* readership that we can develop and improve on the right lines. As we go on, our plans are many and varied, but we want your reactions to guide us and our contributors. This month we feature, for the first time, a photo-page devoted to some of our leading contributors. Would you like to see more such features? And finally, would you like to see the voice of our readers given printed expression in the form of a regular readers' letters column? If so, write in and tell us!

Philip Harbottle

REJECTION SYNDROME

*It started as a case of
mistaken identity . . .
and developed into a
nightmare battle between
man and machine !*

DOUGLAS R. MASDN



Martin Almond, though heretofore no deep thinker, knew he had every reason for panic and could not understand his own cool.

He was lying flat on a soft-tyred trolley, which was being wheeled at a smart clip down a long, white corridor. Overhead, lighting ports whipped past every six seconds. Estimating they were ten metres apart, he began to work out his speed over the ground.

This intellectual gambit was sidetracked by the arrival of a white-coated midriff, level with his right ear and he tried to twist his head to check it out. But only his eyes were still answering efferent nerve signal and short of pushing them out on stalks, he was stuck with peripheral vision.

Pat on cue, the trolley took a hard right hand turn with hardly a check in pace and a five degree tilt on its spring suspension. As it stabilised, he carried an eidetic image on his retina—a chin to navel shot. Female, very trim, elegant neck above a mandarin collar, aureole of fine, ash-blonde hair at the nape. The name-tag on the left breast pocket, disturbed by curve, was hard to read. Technician P. W.—something, a longish name that he had not had time to read off, beginning with M or maybe W.

A hand crossed his fixed line of vision. Supple, capable fingers. An electrum band at the wrist. He felt a soothing touch as she resettled his head in its stall.

Recall began to crowd him. He remembered he had been looking at a girl on a flyover walkway when his shuttle had dipped its hood into the oncoming flight lane, ten metres below.

Looking at patellae on the catwalks was supposed to be an index that life still lurked in the centre of the biological heap. This was support evidence for the opposition. That lack of attention to the console might well have finished him off. He must have missed the signal from the power pack, which gave a twenty second margin to stub the button for fail safe.

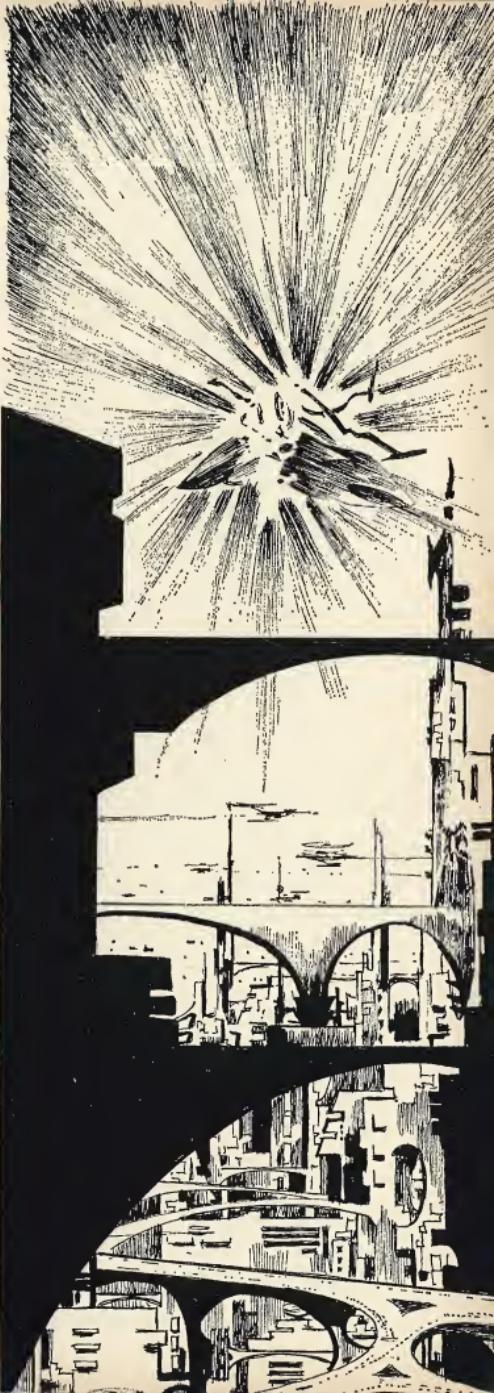
From then on, there was only confusion. A sharp pain down in the right shin. A shifting pattern of faces, as though seen from the bottom of a well. Then a blank, until now.

Well, that was okay. His sedated mind comfortably accepted the situation. Hospitalised. Damage patched up. That was fine. Somebody would have notified the office, picking up the detail from his identity strip. He closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, the set was crystal clear, he was in a small, well-appointed room, predominantly pale blue with a heavy scent of frangipane and a scion of the shrub itself, dangling its silver flowers over the sides of a pagoda-shaped, stainless steel tub.

First reaction was a return to near panic, which triggered off a smart tingle in his left thigh and was succeeded by tranquillising calm.

Every man is deeply-programmed to think well of himself; but he had recognised that this milieu was outside his social rating. As a General Duties Minor Professional Grade, he ought to have been admitted to a



common ward with the *hoi polloi*. His medicare card would cover that. This plushy treatment would set him back a year's credits. He would be paying it off for the next decade.

Alarm at the thought had been a non-starter, but cold prudence was out of its trap. He sat up, shoved back the neat covers and swung his legs out of bed.

The movement was powerfully reinforced and he found himself lying flat on his back on a foam rug, wearing only a short Paisley jacket and looking stupidly at his right leg which was cocked up at a convenient angle for inspection.

From the knee down it was a total stranger; a smooth bronze-finished artifact, with a supple foot which obediently bent its flexible tip when his brain throught up an experimental wiggle as for a big toe.

He was still looking at it when his door sliced open and a long-legged nurse with pale-coffee skin and dramatically flared eyebrows hurried in and knelt beside him on his mat.

She said, 'Oh, Mr. Hazard, are you all right. I was just coming to see if I could do anything for you . . .'

She was cut off in mid flow as Almond drew her backwards across his lap with precise component orientation.

Her lips were warm and anemone soft, a therapy in their own right. But curiosity, evolution's other hand-maid, raised her head. He used his shoulders as a lever and drew himself, circumspectly, to his feet.

'What's going on? How long have I been here?'

'Oh Mr. Hazard, surely you know I'm not allowed to answer any questions, until after the specialists have seen you.'

Guile had been grafted on with the leg. Almond made no sign that the name was new to his ear. He said, 'Quite so. You're a good girl. But the time is not important. You can tell me that.'

'It's almost three weeks. The panel will see you this afternoon. I'd better go and report that you are standing unaided. Well, with very little encouragement.'

'Do that thing and show me where my clothes are.'

Obviously, the sooner he was clothed, the better for all hands. She made a wide circle round the bed and whipped back the hatch on a built-in locker. 'There you are, Mr. Hazard. I will come back in ten minutes. Your shower is through here.'

'Shower? How will this timber leg stand up to water?'

'No problem, Mr. Hazard. Most extensive tests were carried out. You could stay under water for years without any difficulty. Well, you know what I mean.'

She was almost at the outer door, re-settling her hat, when Almond took a purposeful stride to catch up, stepping out, unconsciously, on his tin limb. He crossed the six-metre gap in one convulsive hop and came to a one point landing with his body bent forward under its garnered kinetic urge.

A low hum rose from the ankle as a gyro stabiliser cut in. Almond gathered the rest of his body together and straightened up. The nurse had whipped through

the hatch with a startled 'Eek!' He was alone again with his leg.

He stood on it, bending this way and that to try to beat its balance, but it was rock steady, clinging to the deck like any limpet. Taking it slowly, he crossed to the shower, then to the locker and pulled out a hanging rack.

Hazard was a snappy dresser. Narrow steel-grey pants, polished calchonite ankle boots, a jade tabard with heavy shoulder pleats and a bronze plate belt.

An unusual weight to the left side of his chest had him searching for hidden pockets. When he drew out a palm-sized blaster, he looked at it for a short count in simple disbelief. It was the first time he had had such an object in his hand.

The Almond of three weeks gone would have recoiled from it as from the cold skin of a snake; but the new man approved. It was power. He flipped back the breech and checked that two charge cylinders nestled in their grooved bed. He even slipped it in and out of its pouch a couple of times to get the feel of it, watching himself in a pier glass.

Another pocket held a bill fold with personal data and an identity serial. Rui Hazard, PG/1/233046/G. So the absent Hazard was a Professional Grade One and a security detail at that. Ongoing implications punched themselves out in upper case across his mind's eye. This Hazard was an important man. The leg, now hidden and impossible to detect, was clearly a very expensive and subtle exercise in cybernetics. Hazard would want it. The medicentre staff would want him to have it. Department G would want their agent to have it. He, Almond, was in a minority of one.

A minority of two, in fact. Standing still and letting thought wash about through the synapses, he was aware of a dialogue going on. Powerful reinforcement was coming in as though from a supplementary cortex. Wits sharpened beyond normal, he recognised the source. The leg was not only a mechanical wonder, it was increasing the range of his brain. His ten billion organic units had been given an extension service.

He recognised that the addition was all on the active side. In the past, he had always been a spectator and it had nearly killed him. Now to think was to act, and he found himself moving out onto the verandah of his room before he had fully understood what he was going to do.

Hands on the baluster, he weighed it up. There was a seventy-metre drop to the inner court of the building, which was tiled with blue and yellow flags. Balconies, like the one he was on, jutted out here and there to mark special rooms. The nearest was ten metres over and maybe five floors down. Without hesitation, he climbed on to the rail and stood balancing there on his cyber leg.

A return of pure Almond sent a surge of vertigo through his head. Sharp clicks in the neighbourhood of his right knee signalled that corrective serums were being fed into his blood. His head cleared. He had time to

think that courage was only biochemistry at that and he was launching into free flight.

He landed neatly in the centre of the restricted pad with the leg flexing like a hydraulic jack and his augmented brain ice-cold. At the third drop, he was enjoying it and was co-ordinating the rest of his body as a mere extension of the thinking limb.

At ground level, he crossed the courtyard, entered a service door and threaded a zig-zag of corridors to the street exit.

Now he was on familiar ground. Outside was Metropolitan Throughway Five with a busy flow of ground traffic. This was Tower-block Nine, an intensive use area, dedicated to government departments. The lobby was crowded, but people stepped aside for him as he made for the doors. That in itself was a novel experience. Almond would have been a stepper-aside. The new man took deference as a right.

The time disk on the centre kiosk was reading fifteen thirty and he remembered the nurse. Any minute now, she would be back on the ward, all agog, with an interested party.

He was pushing a plate glass panel, when a hidden pinger started up on a rapid top A and the hinge began to stiffen against his hand. Power developed automatically in his leg to compensate. There was a sharp crack from the locking gear and he was through, with every eye in the foyer tracking him out.

He walked on without haste to the walkway, jumped two reduction bays and was whipped away on the fast lane.

Martin Almond considered the facts as presented by the cool voice of the record clerk in his narrow booth in the information silo. He had worked over a period of three days round the time of his accident and his ear was full of the congealed trivia that had appeared on newscasts at that time.

The street crash was reported in a few sentences. Only Almond had been hurt and he had been taken into the Government Research Medicentre for treatment. Next day he was figuring in the obituary notices as having died from post operative shock.

There was no doubt there had been a switch, whether deliberate or accidental. Hazard's ash was in his urn.

Strangely enough there was no mention of any alarm in Tower-block Nine. That figured. It was the right place for putting on a news veto. Any search for Hazard would be very quiet and discreet.

It would be thorough, however, there was no doubt about that. Even now, very now, the net could be closing round him.

He checked back over his actions. Hazard's clothes were dumped down a disposal chute at the Inter-City Terminal. The olive drab coveralls he was wearing had been taken from a free issue counter, without giving a reference. He was anonymous enough, except that he might meet a contact who knew him as Almond. As one

risen from the dead, he would be sure of a pointed question.

The only course was to leave the city, join the small band of drop outs who spent their time on the move, eating at the free issue diners and sleeping in the transit dormitories. It would serve for a time, until his augmented ego found itself a niche.

Meanwhile, he would not leave without checking on the technician who had walked beside his trolley. She might know something about the servicing factor for his leg. Also, he knew that he had to see the rest of her and check whether the promise of the undulating bib was matched overall.

Almond switched out the patient reader and walked circumspectly out of the silo. He had latched on to the truth that personality was expressed by total physical presence. Without recourse to a false beard, he could merge in the crowd as a non-entity by dropping his shoulders and making small adjustments in body control. Nobody gave him a second glance.

Tower-block Nine had a main frontage on Throughway Six. He went in with the crowd, stood at the information key and set the pointer for Government Research (Medical).

Lights flickered busily about and a ticker tape extruded handily at waist level. He read off, 'The Research Medicentre is situated on floor 32. Elevator service 41. Admission is restricted. A preliminary call must be made from the lobby and all visitors will be met and escorted. Permits are issued at precinct security centres.'

Presumably, with a tight outfit, entrance and exit would be limited. Staff would go in and out through the one channel. It was only a matter of time and she would pass this way. He found Elevator 41 and was looking at its blank panel when the cage homed on its stop and the opaque surface slid away to reveal the inner shell.

Only a brisk sidestep kept him from being trampled in the stampede. Eight fugitives from floor thirty-two whipped smartly from the trap; five men, with a square-shouldered, military look; an elderly type with a high-domed forehead and a black brief case; a female maintenance worker of uncertain age in a sky-blue coverall, and a girl in a short cadmium yellow tabard with a silver chain belt.

Almond saw the electrum band on her wrist as she put up a hand to clear a swathe of hair that gravity had led too far forward for plain vision.

He fell in behind the column. Outside, she hesitated, as one with free time and no special programme, then settled for the slow walkway.

When he came alongside and said 'Hi', the face that turned his way was all set to freeze a triceratops. Then recognition softened the mask, followed by a kind of fear.

She said, 'Oh, Mr. Hazard,' and Almond reckoned that it must be a universal response to the G. branch.

He said, 'Don't even breathe that name. P.W. What is this P.W. anyway? I can't go on calling you P.W. It

sounds like a financier, and although your general decor and perfection of form price you higher than rubies and gem stones, it has a false ring.'

Smooth talk made no visible impact. She was much too concerned with the main issue.

'Oh Mr. Hazard. Why did you leave the unit? There's a full scale search on. They think the operation has affected your mind.'

He tried again. 'So it has. So it has. So it has, indeed. But don't you ever listen to a simple question? What's this P.W. bit?'

Paula, actually. Paula Mentzoni.'

'So it was an M.'

'What was an M?'

I have a distinct recall of seeing you beside my trolley in a white tunic with a name flash. So it's Paula W. Mentzoni. For now we can ignore the W. All will be revealed in the fullness of time. Tell me, Paula, what do you know about my timber leg?'

It's restricted information. If you had waited, you would have had a full briefing from Dr. Karajan. I'm not allowed to tell anybody.'

'I'm not anybody. I'm the guinea-pig.'

'Go back to the unit. They'll be glad to see you. I still don't understand why you ever left.'

'What do you think of me? Be truthful.'

Slate blue eyes regarded him frankly. Almond realised that the dominant quality about this girl was a relaxed stillness. When she stood, she stood without any fidgety mannerisms. Now, she was looking at him without coquetry. A plain dealer.

I thought it was a pity that you were a G-agent. You looked gentle and pleasant. I suppose you have to conceal your real nature. But we all know that you are no better than assassins. Now will you please go away. I don't want to be involved in what you are doing. But if you want my advice, you should go back to the unit and sort it out with them.'

Almond took a deep breath. It was the best speech he had heard and it was ironic that before his personality change he would never have gotten close enough to hear it.

He said, 'I like the way your tongue moves, when you say assassin. Buy me a cup of coffee in a diner. I have a tale to unfold.'

'I thought agents were highly-paid.'

'So they are, but there are reasons why it is better not to use my credit serial.'

Paula Mentzoni watched him over her coffee cup and wondered whether she had been wise. The small alcove, sealed off by a sea-green curtain on brass rings was private enough for any kind of mayhem. She would be discovered, lolled over a half-eaten meringue, with a bodkin hole drilled through her forehead and an extended forefinger writing 'Haza...' in spilt coffee.

His voice breaking softly on the silence made her give a guilty start.

Almond said, 'Surely you don't think I would harm you Paula?'

'How do I know what to think? And how did you know I was thinking that?'

'Since I got this leg, I'm very sensitive to brain currents. It gives me a new dimension.'

'That figures. There's a computer node that hooks up to your nervous system. Nobody was sure how it would work out. That's why it's important for you to go back to the unit. You have the prototype. There isn't another. Or a blueprint.'

'Where does it lie?'

Almond slid back his pant's leg and swivelled the cyber limb onto the table top.

Professional interest saved the day. Where another girl would have rated it as a bizarre intruder on a coffee break, Paula ran a finger down the casing.

'It's a beautiful casting. When I fitted the gyro, there wasn't a split millimetre of tolerance. There are four principal assists. Booster serums in the top band, a metabolic amplifier. Release studs here. You'll have to know about those for recharge. Power unit in the calf, picks up bio-electrical muscle currents, a servo mechanism pure and simple. Well, not too simple. Self-energising. See your three-score-years-and-ten through without a service. Stabiliser in the ankle and your extra brain here—' She pushed a stud in the shin and slid away a flexible panel. The computer node was a plug-in unit five centimetres by two with a recessed grab for withdrawal.

'What happens if I take that out?'

'You miss its counselling voice.'

'But the rest soldiers on?'

'That's right.'

'Well, a leg I need; but I'm not sure that I need advice from a high speed idiot.'

'Unless you report back to the centre, you'll need all the advice you can get.'

'There's another thing.'

'Could there be anything else?'

'I'm not Hazard. I never was Hazard. Somewhere along the line, your bright medicentre has blundered.'

'What do you mean?'

'My name is Almond. Martin Almond. I inspect housing units for the settlement bureau. I was brought in to your casual dispensary after a street accident.'

Her eyes were troubled. He snapped back the cover on his leg and shifted the limb off the table top. There was room then for him to lean over and take her hand.

'I know what you're thinking. But I wouldn't lie to you.'

'Why not?'

There was enough residual Almond about for him to be surprised at his own ease. He said, 'You're too important to me. You're the girl I've been looking for from way back and never expected to find. Don't rush your answer, but I want to file a pairing application. I'll give you a week and ask you again.'

'This is very sudden. You don't know me. And I don't know you.'

'There will be something new to discover every day.'

'Like finding that you are an *assassin* after all?'

'Forget that.'

'Look. If what you say it right, they'll be even more keen to get you back. Mistakes don't happen. Suppose Hazard had a freak weakness that didn't show up on the checks and died unexpectedly. You came in with a damaged leg or whatever. Some quick thinker reckoned they could still try out the equipment and did the switch. Nobody could explain it to you, until you were out of sedation. Then it was too late. You'd skipped. But you're a valuable property. They'll be out looking.'

'They've cremated Almond. Maybe I'm supposed to fill in for Hazard.'

'With that bio-mechanical modification it wouldn't matter. With a little good will you could be Hazard. The big question is would you want to?'

'What do you think?'

'I don't know what to think. I don't know you well enough.'

'But you wouldn't approve of it?'

'You're putting words into my mouth. I'll meet you again here tomorrow. I'll try to find out what's intended. But I'm not in the policy circle, just a nimble-fingered artisan.'

'A beautiful, nimble-fingered artisan.'

'Don't crowd me, Martin. Give a girl time to adjust to a very odd situation. You can't go back to your living space. Where will you stay tonight?'

'I'll get by. I can spend another two nights in the long house. Very sterile. But comfortable enough. I don't know why I didn't do this before.'

'That's as maybe, but if you want my name on a pairing ticket you'll have to do better than that.'

'And you shall have it. Pearls of great price dissolved in rare wine. All the trimmings. You're coming round to the idea already. Keep thinking on that track and I shall be with you before you can say "synthetic regeneration".'

'Why would I want to say that?'

'Now you are being feminine and argumentative. See you.'

Almond's unsleeping leg woke him quietly. He had sited himself half way down the long dormitory and had a perspective vista for fifty metres either way to the pale glow of dimmed ceiling ports over double leaf doors.

There was movement down the line on the right. At first, he thought caution had been oversold. Just a resident answering nature's urgent woodnote. Then he looked left. Melding into the decor, there was a bulky figure standing stock still. Steel grey with dark collar tabs. Special security force. There was a bed-to-bed search going on. Panic flared and faded with the familiar tingle of an adrenalin boost going in. He slipped his hand under the pillow and Hazard's blaster fitted comfortably in his palm.

The seeker was three beds off, turning back a cover to count ten toes when the man sat up like a jack rabbit prepared to fight or bargain for his honour. There was

a soft thud as the security guard chopped down once and the underprivileged citizen lost interest.

Two. One. The guard rounded the foot of the sack; a sallow-faced character, with dark hair in a widow's peak. As the blankets came free, Almond kicked hard and true. His metal toe punched into a yielding Adam's apple with an overkill of force. There was a dry snick as vital vertebrae lost out.

Almond had his place in space and was bending over the bed. He picked up the corpse and tucked it in, under the covers. Then he straightened up and measured the distance down the alley.

Three leaps, zigzagging from side to side, brought him to the far guard, who was still fumbling to bring his carbine round to him, when Almond shot him neatly between the eyes.

He slipped him in an empty bed and looked around. There was no movement. Unless some prudent soul was seeking no evil, the affair had gone unnoticed.

He went back to his bed, checking closely every side. When he was dressed, he carried on along the line, with the blaster roving for a target.

It was not until he was outside on the all-night walk-way for the recreation precinct, that he realised that he would have killed any man who lifted his head.

Martin Almond stood on a high catwalk in the pleasure dome. Wet, fine, day or night, year in and year out, there was a pervasive beat of electronic music, hitting a precise seventy-five beats a second like a carrier wave for ecstasy.

The crowd round the oval pool, with its unwinking, artificial sun was always the same. Individuals changed, but the pattern was everlasting. Seen in plan, it was a ritual dance. Groups forming and breaking. Every colour of shoulder-length hair, long legs. The joker with the tray making an elaborate ploy of service as he brought drinks from a verandah bar across ten metres of sterilised beach.

He should be there with Paula, lying out with the heat beating on his skin, trickling a handful of fine yellow sand onto her navel, doing tricks with his cyber leg as a social gambit.

Preoccupation with the scene slackened caution. A precinct security patrol had climbed the spiral stairway and was less than ten metres off. Almond took a cold look at the set. There was no-one else in sight.

The man was middle-aged, high-coloured from his climb, 'Hey. We want no migrants here. You know the law. Only current credit serials allowed in this sector. Get yourself a job, son. Do an honest day's work and you're welcome. Meantime it's out.'

He was up close when Almond turned to face him and he had a fresh roll for his pianola. 'Hey, there's been a picture sent round. You're Hazard. You have to report to precinct security. That's a lucky break now. I get twenty credits for giving you the message.. Come on, you can use the video in my office.'

Anxious to safeguard his bonus, he reached out and

took Almond's arm. There was a short and brutal explosion of force and Almond was kneeling beside him on the narrow deck. Through the lattice, he could see that the scene below was unchanged. Ganymede was making a clown's mime of tripping over a girl's leg. The pleasure dome attendant was wrapped in a permanent cloud of unknowing. His ka was working out how to get clear of the plexiglass dome.

Almond stood up slowly and braced his cyber leg against a stanchion. He released the studs for the computer node and the bio-booster and his hands hovered over the release grabs. His mind was being torn apart. Almond said 'Yes'. Hazard said 'No'.

Slowly his hands crawled back to his sides. When they moved again, it was to slide back the covering plates. He felt mentally exhausted, as though a war of attrition had gone on within his skull.

His defeated shuffle off the set was no act. He felt that he had aged half a century.

For a time, he slept in a service channel behind a vegetable clearing centre, in a niche between stacks of empty, duralumin crates. Then he walked through the business quarters of the city, anonymous in the press. He was not consciously thinking at all, but he was working nearer and nearer to the place where he would meet Paula.

Ten minutes before time, he passed the entrance. She was not in sight and he did another slow circuit.

When he saw her leave the walkway and cross the square, he was debating whether or not he should keep the appointment.

She looked taller than he remembered. Very straight and self-possessed. Hair in an elastic bell that kept rhythm with her step. Wearing a short, turquoise caftan.

He watched her out of sight, then walked past the door. She was sitting there at the same table, looking straight ahead. Very still. That was her quality. The still centre. The hub pivot of his turning wheel. He was so engrossed in his spectator role, that security guards were three metres off, left and right, with blasters coming up to aim, before a resurge of undiluted Hazard gave him the tip-off.

After the killings, the word had gone out, they still wanted their leg back; but its human adjunct was expendable. Almond's instinctive leap lifted him ten metres from road level as the left hand guard fired a bright tracer line through the space he had been in.

It narrowly missed the right hand marker and both men, bemused by this quick twist of fortune's wheel, were slow off the mark.

Almond at the apogee of his rise, grabbed for the stanchions of a second floor static way and hauled himself over its rim. To the man in the street, he seemed to have worked an advanced variant of the Indian Rope Trick.

Now he felt invigorated, a single man. Jumping five metres left, he leaned out and looked down. The two guards were looking up at the point where he had disappeared. It was easy. He switched Hazard's blaster to

tracer and a bright string slid across the watchers, neck high.

A quick-thinking citizen, out of sight under the static ways smashed a street alarm and a high-pitched clamour started up.

Almond went down through the building only stopping off in a wash room to change clothes for those of a civil P.R.O., who died, his quip stillborn and went naked down a dirty linen chute. He entered the diner from a little-used rear stairway. Paula had not moved.

He slipped into the seat beside her and said, 'There you are. Beauty her own self.'

'How can you be so callous? You have just murdered those men.'

'They would have killed me.'

'That's not the point. You could have given yourself up before you killed the others. Now it's five. How many more?'

'So you know about the others. So you told them to come here. A right little Delilah we have.'

Outside a cherry-red, riot shuttle was sidling down past the picture windows of the diner, with its siren weaving up and down across the basic beat of the alarm.

Paula said, 'I only have to shout and the whole patrol would come running. What makes you think I won't? Even now, you have a chance. Give yourself up.'

'Claim diminished responsibility? I wouldn't get as far as dim. Not a chance. There are places in this town, where I can get a new identity. Maybe a small measure of plastic surgery to help out. But I came back, just now, for you.'

Almond suddenly put a hand on either side of her head and stared into her eyes. They were large and grey flecked, currently almost all pupil, signalling fear.

For a second, she could see his full face, an ingenuous oval, without any strong feature, then his eyes took over, brilliant beyond any she had seen, intelligent, penetrating, as though he was seeing into the cavity of her head.

She could not see anything else. His voice seemed to come from somewhere inside herself, when he said, 'No more calling the gendarmes. Pick up your purse and look at me as though I was your apple.'

At the door, they stood for a spell on the fringe of the gathering crowd and Almond asked an elderly man in a frayed tabard of antique cut, what was o'clock.

'It would be a clever man who could answer you that. Typical bungling by the police, I'd say. They couldn't find a banana in a crate of snakes. Anarchist. Bastard planted a bomb in that Actualities Theatre down the street. Chased up here, but got away. I'd like to know why we pay taxes.'

'What would he want to do that for?'

'God knows. Bottle fed most likely. Trying to even it up with the mother figure of the State.'

'You could be right.'

Almond walked on, his left hand comfortably on Paula's hip and his right holding the blaster in his pocket.

They were twenty metres from the press, when a black and red security tender dipped from a high lane and started down towards street level.

Paula stopped dead. Almond's arm tightened round her waist. His voice had a harmonic of suspicion in it as he asked, 'What is it now?'

'The security truck.'

'What of it?'

'They carry sophisticated, detector gear. Pick up your electronic leg over half a kilometre.'

'Time to move on then.'

He hurried her along, until she was forced into a jog trot to keep up. For fifty metres ahead, there was no break, left, in the continuous, shoulder-high wall of the moving walkways. Right, there was the blank facade of a tower block with its entry porch round the next corner.

Noise funnelled down the alley. The security car had done the sum and was accelerating in pursuit. Prudent citizens were flattening themselves to the walls to get clear.

Almond was running, half lifting the girl. He could feel the rush of air as the car came on. Ten metres from the turn, he looked back.

The windshield was open. A guard was cuddling the stock of a swivel-mounted, riot gun to his cheek.

Feed-back demanded and received booster shots. Almond was programmed to survive. Paula's feet were off the deck and he swung her round as a buckler to take the destructor beam.

He felt the impact of it through his arms and her harsh gasp of mingled pain and shock was carried in a blast of warm breath down his left ear.

Then he was round and the car had run on, going too fast for the turn. It was still manoeuvring to come about, when he crossed the porch.

At penthouse level, there would be an inter-city car service using the highest lanes. He could hi-jack one and get clear.

Paula was still working for him. Carrying her across his arms, he cut a swathe through the press round the elevator trunk and said, 'Street accident. I'm taking her up to fast ambulance service. Keep clear.'

In the cage, his mind was a cold blank, waiting for the next demands to be made on it. At the top, he went into the same routine and reached the check barrier at the car port without a challenge.

An elderly clerk came out of his toll booth, busy and officious, 'What is it, son? Has she fainted off? Rest room's back through reception.'

Almond took off in a one-legged hop over the rail, that carried him half way to the nearest shuttle. A second took him to the entry port and he shoved his burden into the freight bay and climbed in.

Dead ahead, over the rim of the roof, he could see the red security car laboriously making height, out of its flight class. A forward-thinking maintenance mech, had jumped for the driving seat of a service trolley and was bringing it in a tight turn to block his forward run.

Officials streamed out from the barrier, led by a barking dog with a nose for the uncanny.

Almond working at super-pitch, slammed all systems through for a crash start and clawed off the pad with motors beating up to a banshee howl.

Iron-nerved, he tore at the police tender on a collision course, lifting with split-second timing as the pilot gave way in a dive that would crash land him on the apron.

He climbed for three minutes with the cabin automatically sealing itself and adjusting pressure. Then he levelled off and switched over to auto to plot out a course. Below was a polar landscape of white cloud, but the scanner told him that he had cleared the promontory and was over open sea.

He stood up and walked into the body of the silent car. There was a sense that he was alone and in charge of an infinity of space and time.

A turquoise sleeve and a hand palm-up on the deck drew him to the freight bay. But it was not until he was kneeling beside the body that the full implication of it was crystal clear.

Somewhere in Almond's subconscious heap, an alarm sounded. If he took it too hard, the leg would react. He had to play it down.

He sat with his back to a bulkhead and took her head on his lap, touching the curve of her cheek and jaw with his fingers.

Clamping down on thought, he slid back the cover on the computer node in his cyber leg, took the grip in both hands and whipped it free.

Every nerve in his body felt the pain of it as though he had torn out a living connection and he heard his own scream as though from a distance off.

When he could see again, he found he was lying across the body, wet with blood. This time, there was no problem, he pushed the release studs and withdrew his bio-booster. He put both units on Paula's chest and dragged her along, until she was in the centre of the car.

Now he was pure Almond and wondered whether he would have the resolution to carry out what he must do. For a moment he debated whether or not to reconnect his bio-chemical stimulator. But a look at Paula's pale, composed face settled the matter.

This was something he had to do by himself, as himself.

It was difficult to start a fire in the car; but he finally worked it out, tearing up seat squabs and making knee-high piles of packing. When he had it blazing at both ends, he withdrew to the midships section and looked at Paula.

She should have a dog at her feet.

He went there, knelt down facing her and put the muzzle of Hazard's blaster against his palate. It needed both hands to keep it steady; but her face was there to drive him like a goad.

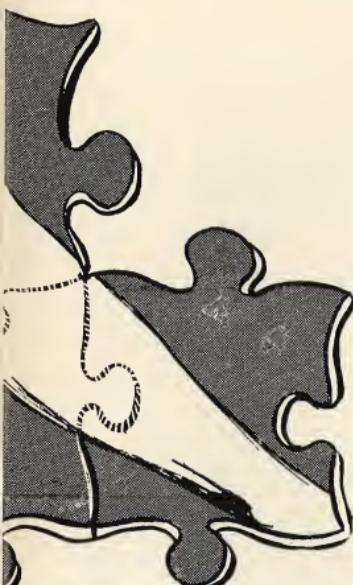
He fell forward and fetched up with his forehead on her knees, as the fire in the cockpit burned through the auto panel and the car began to dip, streaming black smoke laced with flame, in a power dive for the stratosphere.



**One mischievous alien
—with a grotesque talent . . . was loose
on Earth!
And unless Jodell could find him,
no man could be sure
of his neighbour—in fact he might
be his neighbour!**

ZWOPPOVER

Jack
Wodhams



'Hullo, Jodell here.'

Olay's voice crackled in my earpiece. 'That you, Mr. Jodell?' he asked unnecessarily. 'Listen. There's something funny going on.'

The vidophone tube warmed up and Olay's earnest young face appeared before my eyes. My expression must have been intimidating for he said hastily, 'No kidding, Mr. Jodell. We've got this woman down here and she says that she's a man.'

'Oh?' I said. I lifted a mirror-practised eyebrow. 'And is she?'

'No, she's not. No, she's a woman. No, what I mean is, she says she was a man, but there was this woman, and she says they changed places.'

I pursed my lips and stared at him. He became flustered.

'Look, she arrived at the Spaceport from Caladad II this morning. Mort and Teddy cleared her through our department. They remember her. Said she was pleasant. Passed all the tests no trouble. Now something's happened and her gyro's off its gimbals.'

'Where did she come from originally?'

'Her inter-galactic says Rezdon Uniko.'

'Rezdon Uniko?' I was surprised. 'That's a fair way out. The ship must have had a few sight-seeing stops?'

'Only two. Merg One and Gladfall. Other places the passengers were kept under.'

'Merg One?' I said. It rang a tiny bell in the hollow of my skull. 'What's this woman like?'

'Oh, short, dumpy. About 45 to 50 I guess.'

'Ordinary?'

'They don't come any ordinarier,' he said, handling the word very well, 'though at the moment she's running round like a quintick with a sixth leg.'

'I'm. Look, Olay,' I said sternly, 'you should know by now what to do in a case like this. You must learn to curb your excitement. It's probably nothing more than reactive suspension trauma. Have you called in medifinics?'

Somewhat chastened, he said, 'Er, why no, not yet.'

'Should have called them first,' I said firmly. 'They'll get the facts, if any.'

His fresh young face was now ridiculously crest-fallen. 'Yes. I'm sorry Mr. Jodell. It seemed odd, that's all. We're supposed to report anything odd, aren't we?'

I could not help adopting a patronising tone. 'You should always check out your oddities to establish their validity,' I said.

Suitably humbled, he said, 'Sorry, Mr. Jodell. Guess I'm just an eager beaver.'

I smiled tolerantly. 'We are all keen when we are young,' I said. 'Just take more care in the future.'

'I will,' he said contritely. 'Thanks, Mr. Jodell.'

'That's all right,' I said magnanimously, and I let him see me shaking my head as I hung up.

'Hullo, Jodell here.'

'Hullo, Craz, this is Barnard.'

'Oh, hullo, Barney. Hey,' I said, as his picture jelled,



'you're looking even more serious than usual. What's happened?'

'Young Corrampa asked me to check out a man named Oliver Braggerd.'

'He did, did he?'

'Yes. Seems he has an elderly woman who thinks she is him.'

I felt irritated. 'So?'

'Well, this Braggerd didn't strike me as being square. I had a talk with him, and he kept hedging. I think he was hiding something.'

'What about the woman?'

'The meds' are still working on her.'

I had some respect for Barnard Jacoby's nose. A dull, steady type, when a scent was offered, his sniffer would doggedly follow the track. He was a heavy wheel of God for Outside Immigration. 'What do you think, Barney?'

He surveyed me dourly. 'I've got a hunch, Craz. Do you mind if I follow it through?'

I could see he was as broody as an untipped waiter. I foresaw the injured expression he would wear if I said 'No'. 'Sure. Go ahead,' I said. 'We haven't found the Erbuzz frequency-breakers yet, and the colic-carrier still remains to be identified. Not to mention the Crepton bandits and a few others that are suspected of being here somewhere. Apart from these, and the usual things, we have nothing much to do.'

'Then it's okay for me to take it on?'

I sighed. 'Sure,' I said. 'Just don't forget to call in once a week for your pay.'

'I won't,' Barney said, without humour, and put his earpiece back on its hook.

Barney closed the door and the old man's shouts died to a murmur. 'Well,' he said, 'what do you think now?'

'It doesn't make sense,' I said.

Barney straightened and pulled back his shoulders. 'It makes sense in one way,' he said obliquely.

'He's a nut,' I said. 'They're all nuts.'

Barney shook his head. 'Don't you see the sequence, Craz?'

Barney had the annoying habit of assuming that his titular superiors were clairvoyantly cognizant with the obvious conclusions drawn by his simple brain. 'A sequence?' I said. 'Two nuts. That's a sequence?'

'The woman has been cleared by the meds' as sane. She claims she is Braggerd. Braggerd denies that he knows her, but he's hiding something. It may pay us to slap a revealo-session on him.'

'You think he might really have changed with the woman?' I said.

'Yes and no,' he said enigmatically.

I lose patience easily. 'What are you driving at, Barney?'

'I think Braggerd changed with that old man in there,' he said, jerking his thumb.

'What? Him? What would he want to change with him for? And I thought he was supposed to have changed with the old woman?'

'I think he did. Or rather, the old woman changed with him.'

I looked around for a chair. There wasn't one. I leaned against the wall to steady a threatened spell of dizziness. 'Who changed with who?' I said. 'What is Braggerd, a multi-phrenic absorber? They don't take over humans. Or is he a new type we know nothing about?'

Barney wagged his head. 'No. He's not an m.p.a. They're not allowed in.'

'I know that,' I said, with some testiness, 'but a new type might have snuck in.'

He was gracious enough to make a pretence at giving this serious consideration. 'I don't think so, Craz. You know what I think? I think it's something else.'

'Oh?' I said, restraining myself by an effort of will. 'What do you think it is, Barney?'

He spread his hands. 'Isn't it obvious?'

The trouble was, Barney was bigger than me. 'No, Barney,' I said, my self-control at breaking point. 'The old woman thinks she's Braggerd. That old man in there in his wheelchair thinks he is some fellow called Winston. I know! They've got some indetectable insanity bug that's slipped through quarantine!'

Barney looked at me with admiration writ faint upon his stolid features. 'I never thought of that,' he conceded. 'First thing I thought of was a Zwoppova.'

I think I gaped at him. 'A Zwoppova?'

He nodded. 'That's it.'

A Zwoppova. They were not allowed in for some reason. Banned aliens, like the Bokton Legbite-Snappas, or the Suckinges of Irra. A vague recollection stirred in my mind. 'A Zwoppova, huh? Long way from home, isn't it? Dangerous types too, aren't they?'

'Well, you know that Zwopp is an out-of-bounds planet,' Barney said. 'Nobody goes there. They're banned from travelling. You can get 90 years floating deadline even for letting them come aboard ship.'

I agreed with him. 'Yes,' I said, 'but are you sure it is a Zwoppova?'

'What else could it be?' he asked.

I could see that he had made his diagnosis and, knowing Barney, I knew that he would hold his view unshakably until, and unless, facts proved him wrong. Within the confines of his limited imagination, Barney's reasoning tended usually to be sound.

'Yes,' I said. 'Very well. Get to work on Braggerd. Get the truth out of him. I'll call Olay and get him to trace what happened to this Winston fellow. If there really is a... a Zwoppova around, we'll have to work fast...'

I went down to Immigration Reference.

The slim Planet Zwopp file was dusty but informatively concise. The crews of one investigating ship and one rescue ship had disappeared without trace. After that the planet became taboo for a while, and then the survey ship *Craction* had made a comprehensive distance assessment. The planet was diversely inhabited, the predominant species being humanoid creatures who apparently lived in sprawling settlements scattered over the surface of the globe. The *Craction* did not land.

For another period Zwopp was neglected, and then the intrepid naturalist, Sir James Carry, in his scout ship *Proboscis*, went in alone to examine the flora and fauna first-hand. Here there was a notation: See, 'Zwopp, its Plants and Creatures; and, The People, Their Customs, Manners, and Way of Life' by Carry, Sir J. A.

The last item in the file I found to be most disquieting. This recounted in alarming detail the trail of mischief left by a Zwoppova, who had escaped his planet as part of a two-man crew of a ship that had force landed on Zwopp to make repairs. Arriving in Cairo, this Zwoppova had cut an upsetting course that irrevocably involved no less than 41 persons. His machinations had ceased finally at the flickering death-bed of an 118 years-old crone.

Very thoughtfully I replaced the file and went to the library section for the tome by Carry, Sir J. A.

'Braggad admitted it,' Barney said, looking very self-satisfied.

'I should think so,' I said. 'What did you expect? It's no good hanging around him. We've got to track the menace down. Olay is on it now. You'd better join up with him.'

This sobered him. 'Right Craz,' he said. 'Where is he now?'

'Damned if I know. He's supposed to be checking the Winston character. Better come into the office and pick him up when he calls.'

'Okay, Craz.'

I hung up and turned my attention back to the Zwopp volume. It was very interesting in parts.

The Zwoppova had a remarkable similitude to humans and many parallels were evident, but their most unusual ability was that of body swapping. This extraordinary attribute affected their whole way of life and gave them a culture unique in social parity. If a Zwoppova wanted to change bodies, he could do so, by a process irresistible even to another Zwoppova. This meant that a wealthy Zwoppova could find himself a poor Zwoppova, that a healthy Zwoppova could have his body replaced by a sick Zwoppova, that a tyrant-dictator Zwoppova could be transposed to the physical being of a sewage cleaner, that the young could swap with the old, and vice-versa.

This peculiar facility, doubtless a natural survival innovation, would seem to have an intrinsic affinity for chaos. This was not so. The aptitude being unexcep-

tionally prevalent, the Zwoppovas' had developed a society of unrivaled equality and, over period of time, had acquired an humility that might now be said to be inherent. Paradoxically, Sir J. A. Carry said, allied with this humility was a strong sense of corrective justice or, as he put it, considerativeness engenderation.

The vidophone beeped. It was Olay Corrampa. 'Well,' I said, 'What took you so long?'

His chubby face reflected his ebullient nature. 'This Bob Winston has really been on the town,' he said. 'He's something of a dandy. He's a college boy but he talks like a bum.'

'Who is he?' I said.

'Bob Winston.'

'No, no. Who was he?'

Olay looked perplexed. 'He's Bob Winston.'

'Is he Bob Winston?'

'He says he is.'

'Good grief.' My free hand took the weight of my head.

'Is anything wrong, Mr. Jodell?' Olay said, his features back to spainol-like questioning.

I lifted my face. 'Listen,' I said. I looked into the wistful eagerness of his eyes. I felt like throwing a stick for him. 'Call back in an hour,' I said abruptly. 'Barney will be working with you. In the meantime, stay with Winston.'

He seemed relieved, and I wished I could be of him. 'Okay, Mr. Jodell. In an hour.'

The screen went dead. I sighed and returned to the details of Zwopp.

Sir James had much to say on the advantageousness of individual permutation. He pointed out the Zwoppova lack of conceit and disinclination toward personal aggrandisement, and declared that, among themselves, few actual changeovers took place. Malicious and unkind possessions were regarded by the society as cardinal crimes which brought the formidable censure of the whole community to bear upon the wrongdoer, who was inevitably reduced to the most unfortunate body available. How he was kept in that body, Sir James did not say.

The commonest crime, kept readily in check, was pride. The sin of pride, Sir James said, was virtually non-existent on Zwopp, and the people were strikingly honest, sincere and humble. He had been most impressed with the strength of their meekness, of their thought for one another, of their kindness and compassionate sympathy. He described how a family shared the burden of a sick member, each relative for a period assuming the body of the sufferer. He went on to elaborate the controls and immunities granted to the





young, and the customary inviolation duration of the courtship and wedding procedures.

It was a comprehensive study and, superficially, a Zwoppova might be thought to be an innocuous, if not to say, a desirable alien. Unfortunately, as witness the Cairo affair, a Zwoppova was unable to control his essential good nature and sense of personal jurisdiction.

There was a knock on my door. Guessing it was Barney, I popped the book into a drawer and pressed the release button.

The door slid open and Barney came in. He stood squarely in front of my desk and said, 'I ordered a skimmer from the pool in case you decide to come along yourself.'

'Thanks,' I said drily. 'I'm up to my ears in desk work, but I'll be glad to put in extra time helping you to run this thing to ground.'

'Good,' he said impassively. 'I sent down for three repulcups, too.'

'Repulcups?'

He looked at me in his dead-pan way. 'Of course. We'll need them.'

'Will we?'

'We won't catch a Zwoppova without them,' he said.

'Uh, no,' I said. 'Very well. Yes. Good idea.'

I was glad the vidophone beeped.

It was Olay. 'I'm at the Calaberro,' he said. 'We've just arrived. Bob Winston's in the bar.'

'Right,' I said. 'Barney will be with you in about ten minutes.'

'What about the repulcups?' Barney said.

'Later,' I said. 'Get down there and find out who Winston was. He's not the Zwoppova,' I said confidently. 'They don't behave like that. Oh, and while you're down there,' I added plaintively, 'try and tune Olay into what's going on, huh?'

'What's going on?' Olay said.

I shut him off and inclined my head to the door. Barney set his shoulders and ponderously plodded out.

I spent the next quarter-of-an-hour looking for clues in regard to repulcups. I finally found them under Stores Equipment, Miscellaneous, and listed, Repulcups: Zwoppova Combative Headgear—6 doz. gross.

Seeking further, my friend Mutt Farralay in the Spaciality Tech. Dept. dug out an old memo blueprint that defined a multi-mat laminated radiation helmet. This helmet was worn by none other than Sir J. A. Carry on his momentous solo expedition to Zwopp.

That Sir James had not succumbed to the transference deflation inevitably accorded aloof strangers, was ascribed to the fact that he wore his helmet at all times. Not knowing what part of the helmet foiled Zwoppova

takeover, exact replicas had been made, from lead layer to silicone coating, for possible future use by Immigration investigators.

I blessed the forethought of K. R. Bowman, the authorising clerk and, for a sad moment, remembered that it was he who, only two years before, had been ignominiously forced to resign, over the petty charge of unnecessary and extravagant expenditure. A brother-in-law and two cousins, as well as a nephew or two, benefited from the orders he allocated, apparently. There was a fuss, I remember, and he had to go. Pity really. He was a clever chap. Looked ahead. Ah, well, that's the way the thrust-tube tumbles.

When I got back to my office a stores-boy was waiting. I signed his triple chit, and he was pleased to leave.

I opened one of the parcels. The repulcup was filthy.

Disgustedly I rang the bell for Spotty Joones, the general bootboy. Damned if I know why some of the other departments are so inefficient.

'It's unbelievable! Ay cawnt beah it! Look et may. Ay'm disgusting. What a revolting creatch! You must *do* something. You must!' He dabbed at his eyes with Barney's handkerchief, a most incongruous picture.

'You could have a shave,' Olay said tactlessly.

'Shave? Shave? May deah boy, Ay've nevah shaved on may layfe Ay want may body beck! Cawnt you see?' and he began to sob again, quite unrestrainedly.

'Ah, sir,' I said, 'ah, could you tell me exactly what happened?'

'Ay told you,' he said tearfully. 'End Ay em not sir, Ay em madam.'

I looked at him. I couldn't think of much to say. 'Ah, yes. Well you've told my colleagues, but I'd like to hear the story in your own words.'

He sniffed. A runt of 5' 6", his whiskery face was blotched and lined, his dome blatantly stripteasing with a few grey G-stings of hair. His clothing was coarse, his breath bad. He was a scrag-end of a man.

'Oh, very well.' The cultured voice emanated from him, cruel caricature. 'Ay was coming from the Beauty Pawlour, end this person hed his berrow between me end may caw. Ay asked him to kaindly remove himself, end then,' his lips began to tremble, 'end then, ay found myself behained the berrow.'

Before he could burst into tears again, I said, 'And what happened then?'

'May deah, Ay was astounded. Ay just stood theah. It was *awful!*'

'I see. And what happened to you? I mean, what happened to your body?'

'Ay watched it get into may caw, end then it drove awf...aaaaaaaah.'

He started bawling again. It was a most distressing scene. I called the boys over to a corner and we went into a huddle.

'Let's get this thing straight,' I said. 'Winston is the garbage man. The garbage man is the Zwoppova. Lady Halley-Mahk comes out from a face-lift. Lady Halley-

Mahk is the garbage man. Lady Halley-Mahk is the Zwoppova, right?

Barney nodded slowly.

'This happened yesterday morning, so by now the Zwoppova could be anywhere. You shouldn't have waited for me. You should have nailed her. We'd better get to the stately home pronto.'

We moved to the door.

'You are not going to leave may laik this?' the garbage man pleaded.

In my briskest, brusque official manner, I said, 'We will remedy your condition at the earliest possible moment, sir, er, madam.'

'But Ay want to go home. Ay want may own body. You caunt leave may with this...this *loathsome* frame...'

'We'll do the best we can,' I said, and we hastily made our exit.

The attendant locked the door after us, and I paused in passing to say, 'Make sure she gets the best attention, won't you?'

He gave me a puzzled look and I patted his shoulder.

The Immigration team left the alcoholics ward in a hurry.

In the skimmer on the way to the Halley-Mahk manse, Barney said, 'I think what really bothered her was that she had such a weak bladder.'

'Who told you that?' I said.

'The Doctor,' he replied. 'Course, it might be just due to the experience.'

I pondered for a while.

'Don't incoming patients undergo a compulsory enema and scrub down?' I asked.

'Yes,' Barney said. 'That is the usual routine.'

'Must have been quite an adventure for her Ladyship,' I said.

Barney frowned and shook his head. 'Shocking,' he said. 'Shocking.'

It was not much use trying with Barney.

'What is it?' Olay said.

'Don't you know?' I said. 'Here you are hunting a Zwoppova and you don't recognise the most essential requirement necessary to make a successful arrest?'

'No,' he said ingenuously. 'What's it for?'

I put on mirror-face 24, patient, understanding suffering. Condemn them not for they know not what they do. 'Olay,' I said, 'how do you expect to apprehend the Zwoppova when you come face to face with him?'

'Slap the lockers on him,' he said brightly.

'Good,' I said sweetly. 'Now what happens if he changes places with you?'

I watched Olay's perky smile last a good five seconds before it began to fade and look sick. 'I never thought of that,' he said.

I smiled benignly. 'Lucky for you Uncle Crasternack is around.' I plunked the helmet on his head. I spoke rather sharply then. 'A repulcap stops a Zwoppova from

swapping whatever body he has for yours. From now on we'll wear them all the time. We're taking no chances, got it?'

'You are Lady Barbara Halley-Mahk?' I enquired.

She eyed our helmets. She seemed nervous. 'Er...yes,' she said.

'I see,' I purred. 'You are *sure* you are Lady Barbara Halley-Mahk?'

'Of course,' she said. 'I... Why do you ask?'

I put my hands behind my back and rocked on my heels. I knew the psychological value of silence and a superior patronising smile that was not quite a sneer.

I watched her wilt. She looked from the solid blankness of Barney to the fixed idiocy of Olay, and back to me again. 'I... I,' she said. She made a helpless gesture with her hands. 'You won't believe this,' she said at last, 'but I'm not *Lady* Halley-Mahk. I'm *Lord* Halley-Mahk.'

I stopped rocking. 'Lord Halley-Mahk?'

'That's right. It's the most extraordinary thing...'

I scowled. 'When did it happen?'

'When? Why, this afternoon.' She seemed surprised to be so readily believed. 'You see, I found her having tea with the servants in the dining room, a most unusual occurrence. Of course, I enquired what was going on, and she made the most oddly disturbing replies. We had a few words, and I made some remark as to the inconsistency of women. Shortly thereafter I found that I was Lady Barbara, and that it was *me* that was having tea with the servants.'

'I see,' I said. If it had happened that afternoon, then the trail was much warmer. 'And where is her Ladyship now? That is, your Lordship's body?'

Her Lordship did not like the question. She flushed and agitated began to slap her thigh. 'It really is most awkward,' she said. 'Deuced awkward.'

'Come, come,' I said crisply. 'It is our aim to catch the person responsible for this contratemps, and the sooner you give us the facts, the sooner we will be able to restore those changed to their proper God-given bodies. Now, where is Lord Halley-Mahk?'

She chewed her lip. She smacked her fist into her palm and winced. 'I can't tell you how embarrassing this is for me,' she cried. 'It's...it's so humiliating. I don't know what to do.'

My patience is as delicate as a wafer biscuit. 'Where-is-your-body?' I demanded.

She looked at me resentfully, then jerked an inelegant thumb at the stairs. 'Up in the bedroom,' she said peevishly, 'waiting for me.'



I was taken aback. Barney started to move towards the stairs. I stopped him with a gesture. 'And who,' I asked astutely, 'occupies your body now?'

She glowered at me, her mouth and jaw set rebelliously. Deliberately she planted her feet apart, put her hands behind her back and threw out her chest. Her chin came up to complete the discordant masculine stance.

'My damned chauffeur,' she said waspishly.

'There's some kind of gathering up ahead, Mr. Jodell.'

'I have eyes,' I said wearily. 'Get as close as you can and we'll get out and see what it's all about.'

Olay nuzzled the skimmer in as far as he could and we disembarked. I caught the arm of an innocent bystander. 'What's going on here?' I asked.

He turned on me and jerked his elbow free. 'What do you think I am, United Press?' he snarled, and he turned his back.

At that moment a voice louder than the rest rose above the babble and penetrated my ears. 'I'm Jajecki Sax, I tell you! I'm Jajecki Sax. I am Jajecki Sax!'

'Hear that, Barney?'

Barney nodded.

'Okay, get to it,' I said. 'And don't lose your helmet.'

Effortlessly Barney walked through the crowd, and we followed close in his wake. We arrived at the wagon just as a strapped-down apoplectic chauffeur was about to be put away.

The attendant jabbed him with a needle and he screamed, 'No No! I'm Jajecki Sax! I'm Jajecki Sax!'

It made my eardrums hurt. I buttonholed a traffic-controller and flashed my Immigration Security badge. We were brothers in our fight to keep society stable. He looked me up and down. 'Well?'

'Was Jajecki Sax here?' I said.

He sucked a tooth. 'This crowd didn't come here to wish me happy birthday,' he said.

I put on my mirror-face 22, mildly reproving, unamused. 'And where did she go from here?'

'To the Hotel Oriel,' he said. 'I didn't get her room number 'cos she said she was booked till Friday.' He guffawed.

I made a great show of taking his number. 'I'm going to report you to your superiors,' I said coldly.

With irritating geniality he said, 'You do that, Uncle Max'll be glad to hear how I'm making out.' He tapped my repulcap. 'And don't forget to give him the football results, too, haw, haw.'

More respect was accorded my badge at the Hotel Oriel, although I was beginning to regret the necessity for wearing the sartorially inappropriate helmets. I was conscious more than once that our informal pate protectors tended to occasion levity, and only by donning a visage of the grimmest intent did I manage to impart the serious nature of our business.

Miss Sax was an important person. Everybody wanted to see her. The famous tri-di star was exhausted, they said. It was late, I was told, and Miss Sax was

tired. She had gone to bed and would not be available till she met the Press on the morrow.

I was insistent. With no immediate reports of untoward happenings to individual persons, I was very hopeful that the Zwoppova was still vested in the body of Miss Sax.

Eventually, after much grumbling, Miss Sax was called and, very graciously, she consented to see me. We were shown to her suite.

Feeling it might be better to handle the situation single-handedly, I ignored the protested disappointment of my helpers, and posted them to guard the door. The more names in a news-column, the smaller the percentages, credit-wise.

'Oh, hullo.' She smiled. 'Come in, won't you? Take a seat. Let me take your hat...'

I placed a firm hand on my repulcap. 'Ah no,' I said. 'I'll keep my hat on, if you don't mind.'

She gave me a pert, quizzical look. 'Certainly, if you wish.' She sat down on the couch with one leg curled under her. She brushed a lock of hair from her eyes and patted the cushions. 'Make yourself comfortable,' she said.

She was stunningly attractive. Her night attire managed to be decorous without being too defensively obstructive. In my raincoat and accursed helmet I felt extravagantly overdressed. I saw no reason to stand, so I didn't.

I cleared my throat. 'Miss Sax,' I said, 'I have, ah, that is to say, we think, ah...'

Her beautiful grey-green eyes poured into mine, and I swallowed and looked away. 'Ah, Miss Sax, I have reason to believe, ah, that you, ah, that you, ah...' I suddenly realised where my avoiding eyes were now steadfastly gazing, and again I became confused and torn my point of focus to something less animate.

'Now see here,' I said sternly. 'I'm from Immigration, Space Alien Division, and we have reason to suspect that you are not really Miss Jajecki Sax, but are, in fact, a native of Zwopp. You are, are you not, a Zwoppova?'

'Yes,' she said, 'that's right.'

'Oh.' The direct admission deflated me somewhat, and brought my attention back to her eyes. 'You admit it then?'

'Of course. It's true.'

'Yes.' I gathered my forces. 'You know you have caused a certain amount of trouble here,' I said. 'Swapping bodies on Earth is just not done.'

'I know,' she said. 'It seems all wrong. There is so much arrogance and pomposity here. You need to interchange very badly.'

'But we don't do it,' I said. 'It's not our way. When you are in Rome, you should do as the Romans do.'

'And what do the Romans do?'

'Uh? Damned if I know. Don't get off the subject. Look here, you've shuffled a number of people and made some of them very unhappy. What did you do it for?'

'No one person should feel superior to another, or use another without regard,' she said. 'Do you have red hair?'

'Uh? No. Yes. That's got nothing to do with it. Now, you arrived here from Rezdon Uniko a couple of days ago, right? and...?'

'No, not really. I met a poor little lady on Merg One. She was so very unhappy...'

I remembered then the small news item, lost among others, that mentioned a minor personality disturbance at the Merg One settlement. 'I see,' I said. 'Well never mind about that. The point is that you had no sooner arrived than you started to chop and change.'

'Your hat doesn't suit your face,' she said. 'It looks out of place...'

'I don't care about that,' I said. 'Now, will you tell me why you had to change with Braggerd?'

She frowned slightly. 'He was extremely rude and bumptious. I could do nothing else. It would have been wrong to have left him unaware of the feelings of others.' She tucked her other leg underneath her, and in so doing moved a little closer to me.

'Quite so,' I said. I felt a little warm. 'Then you changed with the old man, Jeremish T. Loeman?'

'Yes. Poor old fellow, he was in pain. I just had to relieve him.'

'Of course,' I said, 'of course. And then along came Bob Winston, and I suppose he was rude, too?'

'In a way. He hit a little dog with his cane and walked through a group of playing children as though they were not there. It was deliberate thoughtlessness.'

'Okay. I get it. You thought a spell in a wheelchair would broaden his outlook?'

'Exactly,' she said. 'You don't look at all comfortable. Are you sure you won't take your hat off. It looks heavy.'

'I'm keeping it on.'

She shrugged her lovely shoulders. 'I'm sure you've got red hair.'

'That's beside the point,' I said. 'From Bob Winston you went to the garbage sweeper...'

'He'd never had his share of the better things.'

'...and from the garbage sweeper to,' I shuddered, 'Lady Barbara Halley-Mahk.'

Her arm was along the back of the couch and she leaned towards me. I loosened my collar. 'That woman was the worst example I had ever seen,' she said. 'She took my breath away, she was so imperious. She was flagrantly disdainful.'

'I can imagine,' I said.

Her fingers slid along my shoulder and touched my neck. 'I have an inordinate weakness for red hair,' she said. 'I was born a girl, you know.'

'Uhuh.' She was absolutely marvellous, her perfume intoxicating. I dragged my mind back to business. 'Why did you hop into Lord Halley-Mahk?'

'Because his behaviour was very unmannerly, and he made some very unkind remarks about women. You are curious, aren't you?' she said, her fingers gently strok-

ing and sending shivers up my spine. 'I changed with the chauffeur, for he was another underprivileged person, and then Jajecki Sax, well! So haughty and insolent! It was offensive.'

'You would think so,' I said, 'but on Earth it is accepted...'

Her face was very close to mine, and her fingers on my nape crept up underneath my repulcap. I yelled and sprang to my feet, and clapped my hands to my helmet. 'Oh, no you don't!' I cried.

She was startled. 'What's the matter?'

'I know what you're trying to do,' I said. 'You're trying to get my helmet off!'

Innocently she said, 'Was that a bad thing to do?'

'You know damn well!'

'I'm sorry,' she said penitently. 'Have you got a hole in your head or something?'

'Oh, ha, ha,' I said sarcastically. 'Now we've caught up with you, you're afraid we'll take you in. So you think you'll change with me and just walk out of here, hey? Nothing doing.'

She looked puzzled. 'I only wanted to see what colour your hair was...'

'Oh, yeah? Don't give me that. You wanted to swap with me.'

Her sweet brow creased. 'What has your hat got to do with it?'

I grinned nastily. 'Go ahead. Pretend it's not effective. I know better.'

She sat back and viewed me as though I was a weirdo from cerieville. 'What does your hat do?' she asked.

'It stops you from swapping your body for mine,' I said spiritedly. 'So don't try and kid me!'

For a moment she studied me blankly, and then she began to laugh. The delightful notes tinkled from her, and the more she laughed, the more I felt discomfited. I scowled. 'What's so damn funny?'

She sobered up and dabbed at her eyes. 'It is really most amusing,' she said. She lifted her splendid head. Humour quirked the corners of her mouth. She looked me straight in the eye.

She was right, the helmet didn't suit me. 'What...?' I looked down at myself. 'What have you done?'

'Don't you like the exchange,' he said.

I scrambled to my feet. 'Change me back! You can't do this to me. I'm a man!'

He put on my mirror-face 6, academic interest. 'Strange how Earth-men seem horrified at the thought of becoming women.'

'Please,' I pleaded, 'don't joke. This is serious. Swap back. Please swap back!'

He looked thoughtful.

'Now will you take your helmet off?' she said.

I sagged with relief. I was back in my own skin again. Then I started to sweat. I was alone and unprotected in a room with a Zwoppova. Inside the hollow of my skull my thoughts began to scamper like rabbits looking for a home in mud.



At that moment there was a knock on the door, and I went to answer it, glad of the brief respite.

It was Barney. 'Everything all right in there, Craz?'

'Uh? Sure, sure.' I looked at the nonsensical repulcata that blended so ill with the gravity of his demeanour. 'Fine,' I said. 'Get yourselves a couple of chairs. Make yourselves comfortable. This is likely to take some time.'

'Can't we help?' Olay urged. He looked like a backward frontrow forward, too impoverished to afford the full uniform.

'Something tricky has come up,' I said, 'and I need to think without interruptions.' I glanced at the staid Barney, ridiculous in his headgear. 'See that I'm not disturbed,' I added quickly and I shut the door.

She ran her fingers through my hair. 'What are you laughing at?' she said.

I grinned. 'Nothing much,' I said. 'Tell me, why is it that the helmets don't work?'

She lifted her perfect eyebrows. 'Why should they?' she said.

'Well, when Sir Carry went to Zwopp, nobody changed bodies with him, and it was thought to be because he wore a helmet like this one.'

She gurgled deliciously. 'Oh, dear, how funny.'

'It makes sense,' I said. 'Why didn't they swap bodies with him? They did with the others.'

'I was only a little girl when Sir James visited us: I didn't meet him, but of course I heard about him. He brought us mathematics and English, which is so much simpler than the clumsy language we had before.' Her lips brushed mine. 'No-one swapped with him for the plain reason that he was one of the nicest people we had ever met.' She undid my shirt-clips. 'What lovely hair you have,' she said.

I was doing some frantic thinking, playing for time. And never in my life had the playing been so good. I said, 'You, ah, seem very promiscuous...'

She hesitated. 'Is that bad?'

'Is it bad on Zwopp?' I countered.

'No. Being mutually in such a mood, it would be dishonest to act otherwise, wouldn't it?'

It was a good point. 'That makes sense,' I agreed.

Her arms dragged me closer.

Flat on my back, I stared through the gloom at the ceiling. I had marshalled the realizations into some kind of perspective and I began to tick off the facts. One, the helmets were useless. Two, and that meant that a Zwoppova could not be arrested with any certainty. Three, which meant that a Zwoppova on the loose remained on the loose till it felt fatally sorry for

someone right on death's door. Full stop.

Approaching methods of attack, suppose the Zwoppova was overwhelmed by blankets and given a shot of petricinth? Or again, being sure of the identity of the Zwoppova, the same effect could be achieved with a freeze-bomb. With the Zwoppova safely unconscious, she could be transported back to Zwopp and sent down in a slo-go capsule. The major snag to these propositions was the question of how, and by what means, a Zwoppova could be persuaded to take a restorative back-track.

If the helmets had worked it would have been easy. Bundle the Zwoppova into a small room and bring in the victims one at a time in sequence. Beat the Zwoppova into co-operation if necessary, then send for the ambulance and repeat the procedure.

Then again, some people might not want to change back, like new Braggerd, who had been packing his bags when Barney had called on him.

Direct execution was not permissible and, anyway, the body would belong to someone else. It would be absolutely unthinkable to kill Jajecki Sax out of hand. I went cold. The idol of millions, the epitome of feminine pulchritude, to destroy or deport her would be to have the Immigration Department lynched to a man.

I sighed. I let my brain settle back into neutral. I looked at the radiant gold of her hair, fanned over my shoulder. What a gorgeous creature. And what incredible fortune had brought me here, had placed me in such a delightful dilemma, with one of the most highly paid actresses in the world.

Idly I caressed her smooth cheek, and began to examine a new train of thought. The idea slipped into my mind, and a little voice said, 'Why not?' I began to turn over the possibilities. What was I? Could we stop the Zwoppova? Was the notion so outrageous?

I mulled it over. There were aspects definitely worthy of consideration. Logically, my squeamishness had no sensible base, was purely emotional.

I sat up in bed with a jerk. I snapped my fingers. 'That's it,' I said.

Rudely awakened, she said, 'Wassermarrer?'

I got off the bed, switched on the light, and began to get dressed.

'What are you doing?'

'Look,' I said, 'I read in Lord Carry's book something of the betrothal customs of Zwopp. Is it true that betrothed couples do no body swapping?'

She propped up on one elbow. 'That's the custom. Betrothed couples are not to be interfered with. Actually, we don't do much body swapping at all. Our society is well-balanced and...'

'Never mind that,' I said, struggling into my pants. 'If we were married, you wouldn't swap with anyone else for a while would you?'

'Not for five years, except by mutual agreement. It's a stabilising factor. We...'

'Then let's get married then,' I said, flipping the tie around my neck. 'What do you say?'

I figured that this would at least halt the run, buy time, and if she fell for it, put me in a sweet position. My assignment would be important enough to bring Departmental pressure onto my cantankerous wife to keep her quiet and, while they looked for an answer, I'd be swimming with the tide.

'Hey? How about it?'

'It's rather quick, isn't it?' she said doubtfully.

'It's the way we do things on Earth,' I said. 'I know a Justice of the Peace we can rouse out of bed, and we can make it legal before breakfast.'

'I don't know,' she said, 'it does seem rather sudden. You seem very nice but I really don't know you very well. I don't think I'm ready to settle down just yet.'

'Aw, come on,' I said, prepared and warming to the thought of my sacrifice. 'It won't take an hour.'

'No, I don't think so,' she said. 'I'm very flattered, of course, but...'

I sat on the bed and put my arm around her. 'Honey, it's a great idea. Think of it. With all the money you make as a great star, I won't have to work at all. I'll be able to sit back and relax, and when you come home tired from a day at the studio you'll find me fresh and waiting for you.'

She stiffened. 'What? You just want to live off me?'

'There'd be no sense in us both working, would there?' I put on mirror-face 13, crafty and sly. 'What more could you want than a loving husband who conserves all his energies for you?'

She looked at me with repugnance. 'What an ignoble idea,' she said. 'You want to do nothing but loaf and idle at my expense. You just want to use me.'

'Now, wait a minute,' I said, somewhat petulantly, 'you're not the only girl in the world, you know. I,' I pointed out grandly, 'can take my pick. You're not the first to succumb to my charm, you know.'

She clenched her fists. 'You unspeakable Earthman!' she upbraided. Her eyes flashed. 'You asked for this!'

I looked at him. 'Hold on,' I said hastily. 'What did I say? Don't play your jokes on me. I don't think they're funny.'

'You can earn your own living,' he said frigidly. 'You're nothing but a deceitful cheat.'

'But... But you're not going to leave me like this?' I said aghast. 'You can't. You can't do this to me!'

He picked up his raincoat, turned on his heel and walked to the door. I yelled imprecations at him, and looked round for something to throw. The repulcap was handy and I threw that. He looked back, saw it coming and caught it deftly.

'Thanks,' he said. He put it under his arm and walked out.

I ran over and put my ear to the door. All I could hear was snoring. I looked through the keyhole and saw him striding down the passageway alone. I locked the door and heaved a sigh of satisfaction. These aliens are too naive for the subtleties of us Earth-types.

A million bucks for one tri-di epic! I rubbed my hands. And no wife. What a glorious future. So young,

and here was fame on a platter. No more slaving at a desk for a lousy twenty thousand a year.

I stopped for a thought. Wouldn't it be the craziest thing if I was pregnant? I giggled. What the hell! Then I thought of six dozen gross repulcaps, and I almost curled up and died trying to repress my mirth.

There is no doubt that laughter is very good for the health and complexion. When I walked over to the mirror to gaze at my new form, my cheeks were flushed and my eyes were sparkling.

But gosh! I did look beautiful.

I don't know how long I enjoyed being Jajecki Sax. Perhaps it was as long as an hour. That is a fair time to remain stupid.

I think it was seeing my hair in slight disarray that kicked me off. I picked up a brush from the bureau and began to try and lick my coiffure into shape. It was not easy. As I struggled with the unfamiliar mop, my eye caught the array of preparations and pharmaceutae lined up to assist the cause of beauty. This gave me pause. I looked into the mirror. The face needed lip-stick. And what else?

I looked into my lovely grey-green eyes. Seconds ticked by. The balloon of ego went down to inflate the balloon of doubt. Good heavens! what a fool I was. I was not Jajecki Sax; it was as simple as that.

I bit my lip. What did I know of acting? What did I know of make-up? Of walking? Of dressing? Of my business associates? Of my trade? Of my friends? Of my enemies? I would fall apart in front of cameras, would not know how to behave, had no experience, oh, God! I had no memory for lines. I could not be a wonderful actress. I would just be a helpless, beautiful bag.

I looked at a chewed nail. Nail varnish. Brassieres, girdles, long stockings, high heels, powder, scent, and oh, good grief! I stared at myself, now appalled that I could have been so crassly short-sighted... I was Crasternack Jodell. I remained Crasternack Jodell. I was me, Crasternack Jodell, internal co-ordinator for Outside Immigration, and nothing could change that.

I must have been mad. Someone else is always better off, and how we envy them. But we change places with them, and what do we have? We merely put our same discontented selves inside another skin.

I swore. I could not even speak like Jajecki Sax. My choice of words, and thought patterns, oh hell! Now worried, I began to goad my tiny brain for answers. I stopped pacing. The obvious thing to do was find her, him, ah, whatever, and persuade herim to swap back. How? God only knew. I'd have to think of something.



I thought of Lady Halley-Mahk, and felt an instant deep compassion for that titled woman.

I was wasting time. I hunted through the wardrobe and was bewildered by the proliferation of dresses, frillies, and foodads. I was almost in despair before I came across the sweaters-and-slacks section, and I was glad to see that Miss Sax also had the good sense to pack along a percentage of low-heeled sneakers.

The outfit suited me, but then, Jajecki Sax had a shape that would look good in anything. I had no time to admire myself, and I made do with yesterday's make-up. I skipped to the door, opened up, and cautiously peeked out.

Olay and Barney were still snoozing in the comfortable arm-chairs supplied by the management. Sleeping on the job. I was disgusted. Olay I could understand, but Barney! I nearly forgot who I was. I repressed a snort, and blessed the convenience instead. I tippy-toed along the corridor to the stairs.

'Say, you're Miss Sax, aint you?'

'That's right,' I said. 'You're the night-porter, huh?'

He beamed. 'Gee, Miss Sax, it sure is a pleasure...'

'Never mind that,' I said. 'Have you been on duty all night?'

'Yeah. Is there anything I can get you, like...?'

'No, no. Did you see a man leave somewhere about an hour or more ago? Good-looking fellow, with red hair, and a . . . a football helmet under his arm?'

'Uh? Him? Well, I wouldn't say he was good-looking,' the nightman said, good-humouredly dubious. 'Fact is, I thought he was a thief.'

'What happened to him? Where did he go?'

'He was quite a decent feller, though, for a gov'ment man.'

'He talked to you? What did he say? Did he tell you where he was going?'

The night-man wore a smile like he was glad to have someone to talk to, especially Jajecki Sax. 'Oh, we had a chat. Was you wanting him, ma'am?'

'Yes,' I said, trying to curb my impatience and stay sweet. 'I must find him. It's very important.'

His face lit up. 'Gee. Is he going to be your next husband, uh? Is he...?'

'No. Look. Please. I must find him. It's urgent.'

'Oh.' He grinned. 'I understand. Well, now,' he pointed, 'he went out that door and turned left.'

'Yes.'

'I don't know where he went after that.'

'Oh my God.' I ran from the desk out into the street.

It was after three in the morning. The city seemed deserted. I began to walk.

Where would a Zwoppova go? I tried to get some order into the chaos of my brain, which had suddenly become a battlefield strewn with dead ideas. Where? Where to look?

I came to a small park. Did a Zwoppova stop to think? Turns left, walks, comes to park, rests and meditates. I surveyed the lamp-lit park. It was empty. I walked through and checked.

Coming out the other side, I looked up and down the road. Hopeless. I looked again. Two cabs were sitting at an all-night rank. I walked the fifty yards to where they stood.

The two cabbies stopped yarning as I approached, and straightened up from their lean on a hood. As I came close, fully into the light, they assumed a most friendly demeanour. 'Wow!' one said. 'Can I help you, sister?' the other one offered.

I was not used to this kind of treatment. Somehow it grated. 'Uh. I'm looking for a man,' I said.

'Well, you needn't look any more,' one of them said, and stuck out his hand. 'My name's Ferdi.'

'Oh, ha. Ah, no. I'm looking for a special man,' I said quickly. 'A man with red hair. He's wearing a raincoat and carrying a . . . a football helmet.'

'Football helmet?'

'Ah, yes. Have you picked up anyone of that description? Or seen anybody . . .?'

'Hey, don't I know you? I seen you before somewhere,' Ferdi's buddy said. He snapped his fingers. 'You can't be Jajecki Sax, can you?'

'I can,' I said with feeling, 'and I am. And I must find this man.'

'Well, whadya know? Jajecki Sax! Wow!'

'I thought you looked familiar,' Ferdi's buddy said, now with something like awe. 'Jajecki Sax, the great tri-di star. Gee. Really here.' It seemed to hit him.

'Yeah,' Ferdi said indignantly. 'Take your turn, Rafe, take your turn!'

Rafe spat. 'I wouldn't let a lady like Miss Sax,' he turned to give me a brief flashing smile, back to scowl down at Ferdi, 'travel in a crummy, beat-up, mobile trash-can of a hack like yours.'

'Whut? Whut you say? Trash-can? Trash-can is it? Who's got a twisted chassis that only comes out at night, huh? Who gives crab-cab service, huh?'

Rafe's nostrils flared. 'You only come out at night 'cause the dark hides the dirt. Your heap aint fit to shuttle sh-rubbish to a sewer.'

'They's a law against drivin' sideways. An' who is it loses his float-guides on the eighth intersection, huh?'

'Ah, boys. Ah, fellas. Ah, don't fight, look. See, I'm just looking for this guy. It's urgent, life or death. Please, now,' I pleaded, 'have you seen this man anywhere about?'

Rafe breathed fire, glared at Ferdi, then pointedly ignored him to smile winningly at me. 'Red hair, did you say, Miss Sax?'

'Yes. Yes, with a football helmet and a raincoat.'

Rafe frowned. 'Nope. Can't say I've seen a guy looks like that.'

I looked at Ferdi. He seemed upset. He shook his head. 'Ain't seen nobody like that.'

My disappointment must have shown as I sagged. My body was lost and gone, and how I now yearned for it, ulcers and all.

'It's important is it?' Rafe asked, kindly concerned.

I nodded. 'Very, very.'

He seemed to like looking at me. Full of sympathy, he studied me while he scratched his chin. 'Do you think he might have taken a cab?'

I shrugged. 'I don't know.'

'We can find out,' he said. 'A description like that should stick. I'll call up the gang on the radio. Excuse me, Miss Sax.' He ducked into the front seat of the rear vehicle.

'Why didn't I think of that?' I said.

'Huh,' Ferdi said. He seemed disposed to say more, but my damsel-in-distress appeal stopped any shattering remark he may have thought to make. Instead, he contemplated my sweater with singular fixation. In vain I kept my breathing shallow. Jajecki Sax's chest had permanent built in puff.

We listened for a while to Rafe's incomprehensible gabble.

'Yeah,' Ferdi said. He coughed. 'My hack ain't really dirty.'

'I'm sure it isn't.'

He licked his lips. 'It's just I don't get time. I got a wife and eight kids.'

'Lucky you have a sit-down job then, huh?'

He looked at me, but before he could say anything, Rafe hung out his near-side door and said, 'Apple-face Petey picked up a character like you want. He dropped him off at the Kurdlinge-Forescreet not fifteen minutes ago.'

Never did masculine hope spring to Jajecki Sax's breast as Crasterneck Jodell's sprang now. 'Quick. Take me there, please, can you?'

Rafe leered past me at Ferdi. 'My pleasure, Miss Sax.'

Ferdi leered back nastily.

I climbed into the cab, and away we went, slightly sideways.

The cab halted.

'I have no money on me,' I said. 'Can you send the bill to me at the Hotel Oriel?'

Rafe grinned fatuously. 'Sure thing, Miss Sax.'

I opened the cab door. For a moment I hesitated. Then I bent back and planted a kiss on Rafe's cheek. It seemed the least I could do.

I scooted out while he was still surprised, and ran up the steps into the Kurdlinge-Forescreet lobby.

The Zwoppova had obviously not changed with the cabbie, and I had high hopes that I could meet up with herim again in this moderate second-class hotel.

There was no-one at the desk. I was about to bang the bell, when I heard the elevator doors slide open. I looked round, and there, out of the elevator, stepped a small young man in a rather rumppled hotel uniform. 'Can I help you?... Oh,' he said.

At the same time, a clatter on the stairs gave evidence of a body descending rapidly.

The boy turned to re-enter the car. 'Hey, wait a minute!' I cried, and in a few swift steps, managed to block the doors with my foot. 'Wait! What's the hurry?'

I pushed the doors back, just as a racing figure burst from the stairway, swerved, saw us, and yelled, 'Hey!' It was me. That is, it was my body.

The boy made to dart from the car, but I instinctively moved to forestall him, and my body said, 'Oh, no you don't. What's the big idea?'

I stared at the boy. 'You've swapped again,' I accused. 'He was very uncivil,' he said defiantly.

'Uncivil, he says!' my body shouted.

'Quiet,' I rasped melodiously. 'I have to think.'

'Think? Look what he's done to me! Look at the goofy body he's given to me.'

Somewhat stiffly, I said, 'There is nothing wrong with the body you have. It is, in fact, an excellent specimen.'

'Yeah? Well, it's like all bones to me, and it's got some false teeth.' He took a good look at me for the first time. 'Say, don't I know you from somewhere?'

'Never mind about that.' I turned back to the boy. 'Now see here,' I said, 'this just can't go on.' My hands fluttered. 'You just can't keep on changing places with people.'

'He's done it before?' my body asked.

'Quiet,' I said.

'You can't stop me,' the boy said.

'But... But... But it's so irresponsible,' I said. 'You don't know what you are doing.'

'Oh?' His implied superiority was aggravating.

'Do you realise what damage you are causing? Do you know what you are doing to our society?'

'I am bringing to you a small measure of equality and justice,' he said firmly. 'Your society is most uneven. You really need many more of us to cope with all the adjustments that are necessary.'

I shook my head. 'No, no, no. Don't you understand? We are aliens to you. Our society is totally different. Zwopp standards do not apply here. How can they? Our culture is not based on body swapping.'

'We very rarely change bodies on Zwopp,' the boy said calmly. 'The need seldom arises.'

'Yes, yes,' I said, somewhat exasperated, 'but don't you see that that is because everybody on Zwopp can change bodies? Right here on Earth, you alone can do this thing. You take an unfair advantage when you change with somebody, for better or worse, who cannot change with anybody else. Do you see that?'

'You look like Jajecki Sax,' my body said.

'Oh, shut up. Look,' I said to the boy, 'if I want to change with somebody, I cannot do it, can I? Once you've passed me by, I'm stuck.'

The boy blinked. 'H'mm.'

'You see, unless everybody has the same capacity for transfer, your interchanging process for equalisation is very unfair indeed. Acceptable on Zwopp, here it only causes pain.'

'Pain?' He seemed surprised. 'It only causes pain to those who deserve it.'

'Uh-uh.' I wagged my head. 'Wrong,' I said. 'Take me for example. Who is going to care for my wife and kids?'



My body goggled at me. 'You've got a wife and kids?'

'Will you please stay out of this?' I said.

'I want my body back,' he said. He looked down at himself and wrinkled his nose. 'This body's old.'

'It's a perfectly good body,' I said sharply, 'so don't mess it about.'

'You can still look after your wife and children,' the boy said.

'Oh? And how am I supposed to do that and be Jajecki Sax at the same time? And look after my poor widowed mother? And what about all the people who love Jajecki Sax? How will they feel when Jajecki can no longer give them pleasure because she is no longer a first-rate actress, but a useless, awkward amateur with stage-fright?'

'I never thought of that,' the boy said.

'You are Jajecki Sax then?' my body asked, my eyes shining.

'I'll give you my autograph later,' I said testily.

'You have a widowed mother?' the boy enquired.

'An invalid,' I said. 'I don't know what she'll do without me.' I jerked my thumb at my body. 'He won't care.' Inspiration flooded me like a balm as the key weakness struck me. I became brilliantly inventive. 'Listen, your changes have caused untold suffering. Lady Halley-Mahk is no longer capable of organising charitable functions. Bob Winston's fiancée is in tears, her wedding preparations ruined. And the wife of the garbage man is virtually a widow, deserted and unable to claim relief because her husband is alive. She stands to suffer shocking privation.'

'My goodness,' the boy said, 'what a strange thing. It never occurred to me.'

'It's your way of life,' I said. 'You behave automatically. But this is not Zwopp. Such doings here cause nothing but widespread ferment.'

'Oh, dear,' the boy said. 'It was not my intention to do harm. Quite the reverse.'

'I'm sure your intentions were good,' I said, beginning to feel relief, 'but the repercussions of your actions go far beyond the people you affect directly. We are all fixtures and cannot correct the errors that you make. You have turned our whole system topsy-turvy. Our whole culture is different from yours. The least you could do,' I said reprovingly, 'is study us a little, and learn our ways before wading in and disrupting our society altogether.'

'I want my body back,' the boy said. He pulled out my wallet, removed the notes, and thrust them at the boy. 'Here. Give me my body back, please! I'll lose my job. I'm supposed to be on the board. Don't leave me like this.'

Absently the boy took the money and put it in his pocket. 'What do you think I should do then?'

'Do?' I said. 'You'll have to change back with everybody, otherwise Lord Halley-Mahk will be unable to give his address upon International Hunger Alleviation. You've been extremely careless.'

'Are you charging me with carelessness?' He seemed shocked.

'What else?' I said. 'How well do you know the people you've changed with? They've not been brought up as Zwoppovas', remember. Do you realise that old Jerry Loeman is a wealthy man, though an invalid, and that Bob Winston, now in his body, can disinherit the whole Loeman family? What will Bob Winston care? I'm telling you, you have no idea of the hardships you have brought about.'

'But I did it for their own good,' he defended, but now very doubtful.

'I don't know how it is on Zwopp,' I said, 'but here people are inextricably interdependent. You change bodies with one, and you alter the lives of hundreds.'

'I want my body back,' my body pleaded. 'Miss Sax, make him give me my body back. I gotta start early-morning room-service shortly.'

'See?' I said to the Zwoppova. 'What are you going to do about the people who need to be woken to catch trains and planes, huh? And when the manager comes in and finds a heap of disgruntled customers, what are you going to do about it? He'll be annoyed and justly so. And you,' I said sardonically, 'will think he is being nasty, and you'll change places with him.'

'I...' The boy stopped, nonplussed. 'Oh dear, oh dear. It does seem that I might have been hasty.'

'You can say that again,' I said. 'Keep going on like you are, and you'll spin the Earth backwards.'

'But are you all so rude to each other here? It seems so... so...'

'It's our way of life. We're used to it. Each of us fights to be more equal than anybody else, see?'

'It seems a very crude, discourteous way to behave,' he argued.

'But we're all the same!' I cried. 'Do you know what the chauffeur has done? The one who is now Lord Halley-Mahk? He's sacked the housekeeper, cut the gardeners' wages, and is going to raise the rents that his tenants have to pay.' I covered my eyes with my hand. 'Oh God. What a mess you have made.'

'I... It seemed the... the natural thing to do,' the boy said lamely. 'In such flagrant cases, we... that is, my reaction...'

'The sooner we can work our way back to the start, the better,' I said firmly.

'Yes,' he said. 'I suppose so. I never thought of it like that. You're probably right. O dear. Where do you suggest I start?'

'You can start with me,' I said with some emotion. 'I am just not mentally equipped to do justice to this extremely lovely body.'

'Oh. Very well.' The boy looked at me, and I looked at her, and then down at the tarnished buttons of a much creased uniform.

'No! Whoa! This isn't my body. It's his. He's got my body. Oh, Lord, what have you done now?'

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I forgot.' She looked at my body and said, 'You know, I do like red hair,' and then she said, 'Hey, what's going on? What have you done to me?'

My body caught my eye, and I found myself looking at the boy, who was looking at Jajecki Sax, who suddenly stopped gaping and smiled instead. 'There,' she said. 'How's that?'

I heaved a gusty sigh. 'Thank the Lord for that,' I said. 'Now my grandmother will not be denied comfort in her old age.'

We stepped away from the elevator. 'You love your grandmother?' she asked.

'Very, very much,' I said fervently.

The elevator doors closed. I turned back too late. My money was in a pocket that was already past the first floor.

'Is anything wrong?' she asked.

I'd settle with him later. 'Uh, no,' I said.

'Then I had better change back with the others, hadn't I? Will you be able to find them?'

'We have them all in our care,' I said, and headed for the phone to wake up that goddam lazy Olay Corrampa and the surprisingly snoring Barney.

Boy! Did I give them hell for sleeping on the job.

There is no gratitude in this world. No sooner was the little old lady on her way back to Merg One and a drop into Zwopp, than the Big Chief had me in his fifty-by-fifty pokey.

THE MERIT AWARD

Each issue, VISION OF TOMORROW will pay to the author of the leading story in the issue, as determined by the reader's votes, a bonus in addition to our regular rate. In this way, we will reward authors of outstanding stories, and provide extra incentive to create better fiction for our readers.

After you have read the stories in this issue, fill in the coupon alongside. Number the stories in the order in which you place them, from 1 to 5. The results will be announced in a later issue. The reader whose voting most nearly parallels the final result, and who writes the best letter of 20 words or longer on why he or she selected the first place story for that position will also be awarded a cash prize of £2 2s. Od.

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VISION OF TOMORROW,
2, St. Nicholas Buildings,
St. Nicholas Street,
Newcastle upon Tyne, 1.

There were complaints from all involved. Powerful charges of dilatoriness came from the Halley-Mahks', and there was a threat to sue from Miss Sax. Bob Winston accused the department of gross inefficiency, and Jeremiah T. Loeman wrote a diatribe about meddling, interfering busi-bodies. There was even a nasty abusive scrawl from the garbage-man. Not one word of thanks. That's people all over.

My wife somehow found out about my long interview with Miss J.S., and *she* burnt my ears. Man, I'm telling you, appreciation is the hardest thing in the world to obtain.

It was fortunate that the Jodell resilience was formidable. I liked to look on the bright side, and one or two aspects of the case gave me enduring pleasure. One was the elevator punk who I cornered shortly after in his car. I stared piercingly into his eyes and threatened to swap bodies if he didn't give me my dough back. He coughed up. Another event, a while later, was the sudden marriage of Miss Sax to an up-and-coming, tall-dark-and-handsome actor. This wedding was subsequently followed by the birth of one of the best-looking ginger kids you ever saw.

A tough life? Sure. But I wouldn't be in anybody else's shoes.

Would you?



In my opinion the stories in this issue rank as follows:
NO. HERE

.....REBIRTH by Lee Harding

.....LIMBO RIDER by Sydney J. Bounds

.....ZWOPPOVER by Jack Wodhams

.....REJECTION SYNDROME by D. R. Mason

.....INTO THE UNKNOWN by John Russell Fearn

Name

Address

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(Please use facsimile of this form if you do not wish to mail it in your copy).



Lee Harding REBIRTH

Beyond the confines of Dumas' world
were forces that shaped his
destiny . . . but an even greater
force was at work!



© EDDIE JONES.

In the high, vaulted chamber of the Chief Controller—where errors of judgement and minor indiscretions were dissected with an icy grace—Calvero faced his superior nervously.

'Today, I was followed again,' he announced. 'And by the same young man as before.'

Philemon leaned forward and scowled. He was a giant of a man, arrogant and demanding, for these were the badge and seal of his office. He boasted a great mop of black, gleaming hair that swept down to his shoulders, and an expression that was nearly always dour. He did not take kindly to administrative problems. The burden of office had become a bore long before it had promised to become a source of pleasure. He liked his comforts and he was loath to be distracted.

'You are sure of this?'

Calvero nodded vigourously. 'Indeed I am. The creature followed me for some distance, well away from its programmed area and into a sector of the city it had not previously frequented. I would assume that, from the generally dazed and uncertain nature of its movements, it had definitely malfunctioned.'

'You have checked out the programme in question?'

'Indeed I have. Everything is in order.'

'And yet you were recognized, you say, and *followed*. Now that is patently impossible!'

'I realise that, your excellency. But I am sure the creature followed me with some sort of intention. The mistake must lie somewhere in the Basic Unit itself...'

'Impossible.' Philemon shifted his massive bulk away from his desk—it was a solid, irrevocable reminder of his responsibilities and oh! how he detested it—and stood up. 'There's too many things going wrong down there,' he growled. 'Far too many. What say you, Calvero, are your creatures sick and wandering? Is some disaster in the offing? Have your people bungled in their Programming, and can we expect these disorders to mount until the sanctity of the entire Construct is threatened?'

Calvero quaked. He ran his fat little hands together as though they needed washing. Such thoughts were unthinkable. It was an affront to science—and to man—to suggest such disorder. He, Calvero, had personally supervised the re-animation and reconstruction of several dozen dead worlds, without any difficulty whatsoever. But what had gone wrong with his newest work?

The Construct had been through thirty-four cycles. Some minor aberrations had become evident about halfway through and had been on the increase ever since. And all their efforts to locate and isolate the faults had been without success.

'Well?'

The Chief Controller's question was framed like the roll-call of doom. He fixed Calvero with a fierce and probing eye and left him there to writhe, seeking desperately for some sort of explanation, even one that would delay the inevitable. He desperately needed time to extricate himself from responsibility.

'I . . . I don't know, your excellency. My men have done their best. They have—'

'They have not done *enough*, Calvero! You must understand that!' Exasperation clouded Philemon's wrath. Angrily, he began to pace around the room in great, even steps.

'I just don't understand it,' the little man wailed. 'I don't understand it *at all*.'

Where had they gone wrong?

Where?

He had watched them dig up the dead bones of this world and put it back together again. Under his experienced direction, they had sifted the soot of ancient empires and ran their sensitive probes through the residues of departed centuries. He, personally, had selected the Time Zone and designed the Programme and placed his synthetic creatures in position. He had watched the Construct flow smoothly into life and felt the glow of pride and achievement that always came when everything had worked out exactly as he had planned. Scholars and historians had flocked to his latest archaeological masterwork and tourists, jaded with the marvels of a plundered galaxy, fought to buy passage to his world. And now . . .

Now some malevolent little maggot was gnawing away at his creation. In time the entire reconstruction would be threatened, in which case they would have to apply stasis and tear the whole thing down; and begin again. And all that work would have been wasted. More to the point:

Heads would roll. Philemon's most assuredly for, as Chief Controller, he must shoulder the final responsibility, and he would see to it that Calvero's head joined his on the gibbet. He was a sore loser.

'Well, my little quivering friend?' he demanded. 'Have you any further suggestions that might throw some light on this matter?'

Calvero bowed his head, the gesture eloquently allowing that he did not.

'You miserable whelp,' Philemon growled. 'This whole Construct will collapse if we don't do something about it, like an old house riddled with rodents! Ah, I don't know why I even bother to hear you out. Away with you at once! I will send for you again soon enough . . . begone!'

The little man abased himself in terror and fled from the chamber.

Alone, Philemon considered the problem.

In the last few centuries man had reconstructed eighty-seven worlds, moving backwards in space and time in search of his origins.

At some time in the remote past mankind had spread out from the First World and scattered its seed haphazardly through an empty universe. Such audacity defied belief, for those distant ancestors had possessed no faster-than-light means of travel, and so they had been forced to journey slowly, and with unimaginable patience, to the furthest reaches of the galaxy. During

this eons-long process the original society became a hundred—a thousand—and history donned masks of confusion and mendacity when the new mythologies began to take root and flourish.

During this long interregnum of isolation and lack of proper intercourse, many marvellous new skills were gained, and many more that were old and reliable were lost. With the arrival of a faster-than-light space drive the process of knitting together the far-flung societies was begun. And there were great wars and uneasy times of peace while the fragmented race sought a singular identity, and out of this conflict were created even greater skills.

Skills that now enabled man to work his way across the cosmos re-animating the relics of his lost empires, discovering, in the process, arts and sciences that had already been unbearably ancient when humanity had first fled the First World and sought the nearby stars.

In some ways it was like a never-ending pilgrimage to discover the source of being. And never, in all of three hundred years, had anything quite like this threatened to bring chaos to a reconstruction.

It must be something to do with the original Programming, Philemon reasoned. And if they could find it, root it out before anything more serious occurred, then a disaster might be avoided. His head might even be salvaged!

But if the situation worsened while they dithered then there would be no recourse other than to apply stasis and tear down the reconstruction. And file application to begin all over again.

The repercussions to such an extreme act would be considerable, especially for himself.

No, there was nothing for it but to go and view this phenomenon personally, at close range, and see for himself what was wrong. One couldn't always rely on the word of a subordinate, no matter how highly his work stood in regards to others or how much one, personally, detested the man. Even at world's end there is always time for personalities.

He issued a directive.

Disgruntled observers—historians and scholars for the most part, complaining tourists for the remainder—were quickly recalled from the Construct. With the exception of the blue uniformed Inspectors who kept a constant check upon all facets of the reconstruction, the world was turned over to the unthinking creatures which Calvero and his staff of specialists had placed there thirty-four cycles ago.

When everything was ready the Chief Controller gave his penultimate command. Somewhere—it did not matter exactly—a switch was activated and a cycle set into operation that would gradually apply stasis to the Construct, the better for Philomen and his hastily-assembled entourage of advisers to make their observations comfortably and at close range.

Without any fuss, or grinding of invisible gears, the world came to a stop.

Dumas ran.

Through a forest of frozen faces where blind eyes saw nothing and impotent mouths gaped alarmingly at nothing. Through unmoving ranks of people, their gestures arrested in mid-movement, as if the awkward engines of their lives had stalled for some great occasion. Through fearful canyons of mindless statues, where no sound penetrated and no women wept, and the noise of his bare feet on the pavement and the roar of something else in his ears filled the known universe.

Ran, because there was nothing else he could do, no other protest he could make, because he had woken from a dream and had been catapulted into the arms of a nightmare. To escape he must run, as one always ran in dreams like this, and so he ran, naked and confused and unable to scream or make himself heard, for something had stopped up his ability to speak, as surely as it had stopped his ability to think.

He ran for his life, and did not understand *why*. Somewhere, in another of the dim cupboards that had untuned his mind, he had always feared *this day, this awakening, this discovery*, but even that could not explain the terror that drove his flying feet, or the way his blind mind stuttered and stammered its way from one half-formed thought to another.

Something drummed in his ear. Was it blood or his own tortured breathing? His feet found no answer but drove him on through the terrifying human forest.

Sometimes he stumbled in his flight, but the figures did not move or keel over. They *should* have fallen, but something he could not understand held them rigid in their stance, and behind some glazed eyes he could glimpse an animal awareness struggling to get out.

But stasis was a cruel warden.

He ran—but *where* was he running, and to *whom*, and from *what*? These were the questions that occasionally bubbled to the forepart of his disordered mind but were soon reabsorbed in his general confusion. He ran because he could think of nothing else to do.

Eventually his muscles weakened and cried out for a rest. He reeled to a stop and leaned against a building. The world—this crazy, unfamiliar nightmare of a world—began to move sickeningly around him. He closed his eyes and covered his face with his hands and began to speak in dry, racking sobs.

If only he could *think!* If only he could . . .

A steady, high-pitched sound drifted down from overhead. He looked up and saw a sleek golden craft cruising towards him, half-way up the great canyon between the buildings.

He crouched down, involuntarily wishing to hide from the intruders . . . and then he heard another sound.

It came from further up the street, and almost at pavement level. He craned his neck out past some of the human statues . . . and saw them.

Moving towards him. Four strange men dressed in iridescent blue suits, each suspended in a golden nimbus of power that looked much like an ancient sedan chair, cruising along a short distance above the frozen

street and coming towards him with a threatening intent.

He broke from cover and ran, his lungs near to bursting, colliding with and rebounding quickly from the mindless spectators, but somehow making his way clear of the main thoroughfare and into the more densely populated side streets.

Philomen's face was ashen. There could be no question about it: the Construct was in danger. Reports were coming in from all over the place that gave substance to Calvero's worse fears.

An interplanetary probe, ostensibly parked in a permanent orbit fifteen hundred miles above the world's surface, had somehow managed to eject itself from its programmed position. Currently it was on an automatic course for one of the nearer planets, with a wide-eyed crew of three puzzled astronauts wandering around inside wondering what to do with themselves.

Of course the ship would be retrieved and brought back to its original position. But that was only the beginning . . .

Throughout the Construct the malfunctions grew and snowballed. People wandered dazed and disoriented from their assigned areas; the stasis had not affected them. Even the lower species had been infected by the unprecedented blight: birds flew in wild, uncertain circles, and caroomed across the countryside in confused formation. Some fish twitched irritably in rivers that no longer ran, and out in the oceans the great depths stirred where mindless creatures roiled.

It was a dismal prospect. And there was no explanation for such behaviour. Every creature in the Construct had been disconnected from its Programme. Whatever was responsible for this confusing residue of activity would have to be rooted out and destroyed—if that were possible.

The Chief Controller and his fearful subordinate Calvero took some of this in from the vantage point of a swift-moving surface car. They moved quickly through each of the seven reconstructed cities and sought out each terrifying piece of information.

'Look—there's another!' Calvero pointed to the figure of the running man beneath them.

'I see him.'

'Shall we—?'

'No, not yet. Leave him be,' Philemon snapped. His voice was heavy with the strain of their investigation. Every mile they travelled brought some fresh new doubt into his mind. There seemed to be no possible way of salvaging the Construct.

'Take us up,' he directed the pilot. 'Higher. To the highest point in the city.'

The small craft obeyed. They arrowed up into the sunlight.

Minutes later Philemon stepped out onto the roof of the tallest building and surveyed the city in its grip of stasis. No breeze moved against him as he stepped closer to the parapet, but the bottom edge of his purple

cape moved restlessly.

Was it only his disturbed imagination, or could he feel—just occasionally—the gentle pressure of air moving against him?

The climate of the Construct was carefully maintained at an agreeably temperate level in this part of the world, yet he caught himself shivering. He pulled his cloak around him and stared down into the deep canyon in front of him.

'Can you feel it, too, Calvero?'

The little man shuffled forward uneasily.

'And can you *hear* it, too, Calvero?'

'Hear what, excellency?'

'Those sounds. Those little whispers of activity. This is a restless city, Calvero, a restless *world*. And what has made it so?'

Calvero said nothing, but managed to look deeply disturbed. He had already said too much. Why endanger his head any more than was necessary?

But Philemon did not seem to need the corroboration of another tongue. The look of a man uneasily possessed passed over him as he said, 'What have we discovered here, Calvero? *What have we discovered that so defies our Programming?*' A look of astonishment passed between them.

'Can it be . . . ?'

'No, excellency, no!'

'But why not, my good man? It is old enough, it is distant enough, and the *time* is propitious! You have shown me yourself how you selected a Time Zone that would display an advanced society preparatory to advancing into space. . . .'

A darkness blossomed in his mind that threatened to engulf him.

Was it true? Philemon wondered. Could this husk underneath them be the First World?

'Come,' he commanded. There was some reasoning behind his next move that he could not properly understand. All he knew was that he wished to descend quickly to street level and seek out that running man and look into his eyes.

Perhaps there he might find an answer.

Something moved through the city. It could not be seen or felt, but it had touched Dumas and the minds of all those people around him. But some were not yet ready; another cycle might have to run through before the dim spark of awareness planted in their synthetic brains would mature and throw them into action. For the moment their sightless eyes could only mirror the terrible struggle that went on in the fortress of their minds.

It had slept for eons and was in no hurry, and after it had touched Dumas and his people it moved on about its business, leaving the city behind and spreading out to encompass the reconstructed face of the land. For those who were ready it could be sensed as the most gentle of breezes, its presence owing more to the weight of sunlight from the rekindled sun than from any conscious movement of the air.

Dumas sensed it sometimes. He had ceased to run now that his strength was exhausted, and instead plowed his way through the narrow, crowded streets of the city, looking for some sign that he was not alone in his nightmare.

Some frozen faces seemed more alive than others. He studied them closely, perhaps aware of the struggle going on inside their uncommunicative minds. And then he moved on.

His body throbbed and tingled, and not all of it was from exertion. There was a burgeoning awareness here that he could only fumble with.

Ahead of him, a figure crossed the street. He tensed, but it wasn't one of the nightmarish figures in blue, but a slip of a girl in a bright red skirt.

'Wait!'

His cry broke the silence like an axe. The word echoed and re-echoed through the canyons, a sound that should have been loud enough to wake these living dead. But they did not stir, or, if they did, their movements were much too small for him to notice.

He set off after her. Across the street and down the other side and left into the side-street. Several times he had to stop and listen for her fleeing footsteps. Finally he lost them altogether.

He was still standing on a corner, confused and beyond hope, when the golden craft descended.

He watched it settle quietly on the pavement, and watched the canopy swing back. His dull, staring eyes offered no resistance.

He saw the two men get out and walk towards him. One was tall and wore a flowing cloak of royal purple; the other man was short and pudgy: he had seen him before.

He made an effort to move, but thought better of the idea. To every fugitive there comes a time of reckoning and he was more than ready for his.

On either side of him the blue-clad men were closing in with caution. He did not challenge their right to do this. He waited. His defiance had dribbled away, but what remained burned with such fiery promise that it dazzled his mind.

Philomen approached the mechanism cautiously. Calvero quaked three steps behind and a little to one side. The Chief Controller raised one hand and the nearest Inspector thumbed his stasis stick—set several notches higher than was really necessary—and dropped a net of force over Dumas. He froze into instant immobility like the statues of his people.

Philomen stepped closer and looked deeply into the dark eyes of his quarry. A cold wind seemed to blow through his soul and he wrapped his cloak tight about him.

Dumas stared back, conscious of his captor and with a mind that worked against itself in an effort to break the terrifying stasis.

Their eyes locked. Something indefinable flowed between them, an exchange of fears and hopes, and when

it was over Philemon stepped back, and averted his face, as though he had seen a ghost.

Calvero stepped quickly forward, concerned for his master. 'Excellency, what is the matter? Excellency . . . ?'

Philemon brushed him aside, and then, for want of a better audience, he turned back to him and said, with a voice buried deeply in emotion and with a haunted, worried look in his eyes, 'Calvero, there is something . . . here . . . over which we have no control. The Constrict is doomed . . . unless we shut it off, now.'

'But excellency . . . !'

I know, I know! And I do not wish to . . . but for reasons other than your own . . . '

Behind him, the synthetic mind of the creature they had made and called Dumas, stared out at them through sightless eyes that carried the weight of eons.

'Calvero, consider this: if we have indeed discovered the First World, the Place from which all things began, why, every stone and every leaf must bear the irremovable imprint of Man, every atom must be drunk with His presence, with the memory of mankind! No other world in the known universe carries a burden of civilisation as old as *this*; there is something here that can be found nowhere else in the galaxy. Man was born here, Calvero, has left his imprint upon space and time in a way quite different to his progeny. There is a presence here that we cannot escape, the presence that sent us out to seed an empty universe. And we have raised its buildings, plundered its past, and peopled it with our artificial creatures and preserved a Time Zone that we think is significant: more significant than he could have guessed.'

'Can't you *feel* it, Calvero? There is something that moves across the face of this world that our instruments cannot measure, our minds cannot grasp; something we haven't put here, but which is infiltrating the minds of our creatures. Oh, Calvero, listen! Listen!'

And they did, and seemed to sense a restless susurru of sounds moving through the canyons of the city and groping blindly for the shape and the substance that would give it form.

Locked in his stasis, Dumas did not hear, but *felt* it moving through him, invading the synthetic cells of his body and endowing them with purpose. If only there had been more *time* . . .

'What shall we do?' Calvero wailed. The concept was much too big for his gibbering small mind to handle.

'Do?' Philemon raised his eyes towards the no longer trustworthy sky. 'What *can* we do? Shut it off? Impossible. And it is not only our heads I am thinking of, Calvero, but of man; it is in our nature to define the truth of all things.'

'Then you'll let it continue?'

'Yes. For another cycle—and *another*; until this thing is finished. Until . . . ?' His words trailed away and were lost.

'But these creatures cannot live!' Calvero protested. 'They cannot have free will! We created them! They

cannot become *conscious*. They cannot... His eyes surveyed the Chief Controller fearfully. 'Have we, then, created *life*?'

Philemon shook his head.

'But I have heard,' the little man maintained, 'that this was one of the Lost Skills...'

'Perhaps it was. But we have not—alone—created this life we see here. Something else provided the Breath. We merely provided an instrument...'

'But they cannot achieve true consciousness!'

'And what is that, pray tell? I have a strong feeling, little man, that these... these creatures will have a level of consciousness as different from ourselves as the First Man was from the tree animals.'

And he thought of the heart in his own chest, and of the blood that gave him life, and he looked up at the sky and wondered if Man, after all had been the precursor of all things, and if they were but one link in an evolutionary chain that would continue until the last syllable of recorded time.

'Impossible!' Calvero screamed. 'Impossible! We must shut it off—'

'We must let it be. We must bear witness to this thing, Calvero, so shut your miserable little mouth.'

An immense pride had blossomed within his cold uncaring heart.

'No, no,' wailed Calvero, 'they cannot endure! They cannot procreate...'

'They will find a way.'

'Then we must stop it—before it is too late!'

'You have a small brain, a small body, and a small ambition. Perhaps it is already too late, Calvero.'

'But it mustn't be!'

'Then why don't you try, while there is still time?' Philemon's tone was mocking. 'Go ahead.' He knew that whatever moved across the face of this world could manage.

'I will... I will!' Calvero wailed, and waddled back towards the surface craft. He climbed aboard and jetted quickly back towards Control Headquarters.

Philemon watched him go, and then turned around. Dumas and his keeper stared at each other across a frozen ocean of silence. The face of Philemon the Controller had undergone a subtle change, so deeply had the processes of his thoughts begun to affect his expression. His mind vacillated—unable to decide whether he should bow, or kneel, or express his understanding in some other meaningful way—sure of only one thing: that his vigil be maintained.

So they waited, and in another corner of the world a Child was born.

And they waited, together, for the end of the world. Or the beginning.



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Moons of Jupiter

By DAVID A. HARDY, F.R.A.S., A.F.B.I.S.

Jupiter, the giant of our Solar System, has twelve satellites or moons, revolving in a variety of orbits from as close as 113,000 miles (less than half the distance of our own Moon) to 14,700,000 miles. Four of them—called the Galilean moons, because Galileo first saw them through his telescope, although they are so bright that some people claim to be able to see them with the naked eye, and certainly a good pair of binoculars will show them with little trouble—travel in almost circular orbits up to about a million miles out. Three others also follow quite regular paths, about seven million miles out; but the four outer ones travel in quite elongated ellipses and are 'retrograde'—that is, they travel in the opposite direction from the other eight.

If you have been adding up, you will notice that I have missed one out. This is Amalthea, also known as Jupiter V because it was the fifth to be discovered, and it circles so close to the cloud covered surface of the planet that the view must be utterly fantastic. (There can be few readers who have not read Arthur Clarke's classic short story based on this moon, in which it turns out to be a hollow metal sphere!) Although the distance from Jupiter is usually given as about 113,000 miles, this is from the *centre* of the planet, which means that Amalthea orbits a mere 68,650 miles above the cloud belts: imagining the scene from the tiny moon as it hurtles over the mighty atmospheric maelstrom of Jupiter at 1,000 miles a minute.

The huge oblate sphere, passing through all its phases in under twelve hours, would occupy fully a quarter of the otherwise black sky—when its lower limb is on the horizon its upper limb is in the centre of the heavens. An ideal site from which to observe Jove, and it may be as close as Man will ever get. Of course, it is under severe gravitational strain (it may even be egg-shaped) and will eventually break up and form a ring like a second Saturn; this will happen quite soon on the cosmic time-scale, though future astronauts have no cause for worry, as it may take 70 or 80 million years...

The four 'Galileans' are worlds in their own right. The largest, and fourth moon from the planet, is Ganymede, which is 90 miles greater in diameter than the planet Mercury, being 3,120 miles across. It is yellowish in colour, and may just possibly possess an atmosphere; but it is not very dense. Io and Callisto, on the other hand, have relatively high densities, and it has been suggested that a lot of metals are present, perhaps covered with a surface layer of oxide smoke. Europa is the smaller, but is very bright, so that it absorbs very little sunlight and must be extremely cold—perhaps with an icy landscape, which would account for its high reflectivity.

My painting for the cover of this issue of *Vision of Tomorrow* shows Jupiter as seen from Callisto, the fifth moon from the planet (1,170,000 miles away, shown in 'half' phase), which is perhaps the most interesting of the

four large moons. It seems oddly insubstantial: it may be slightly smaller or even slightly larger than Ganymede, according to different observers, and its colour is unusual, having been described as bluish, violet, or even reddish. It has a darkish equatorial zone and a bright patch near the south pole, which is the viewpoint of my picture (on the planet, the Great Red Spot can be seen. This lies just north of the South Temperate Belt and, as here, is usually shown on the upper part of the planet in telescopic photographs—but they of course invert the image so that South is at the top). Because of its curiously low density it has been suggested that Callisto is a sort of 'celestial snowball' made up of loose, icy materials, or that it may have a light, rocky core overlaid with a layer of ice, with occasional outcrops, as in the painting. On the left of the planet is Ganymede, its 'night' half reflecting the light of Jupiter. Europa is on the right.

Of the four outer satellites, two travel on 'open' orbits which are never repeated from one to the next. They are very small—less than 50 miles—and one was discovered only in 1951. In all probability they are no more than asteroids which have been captured by the immense gravitational pull of Jupiter.

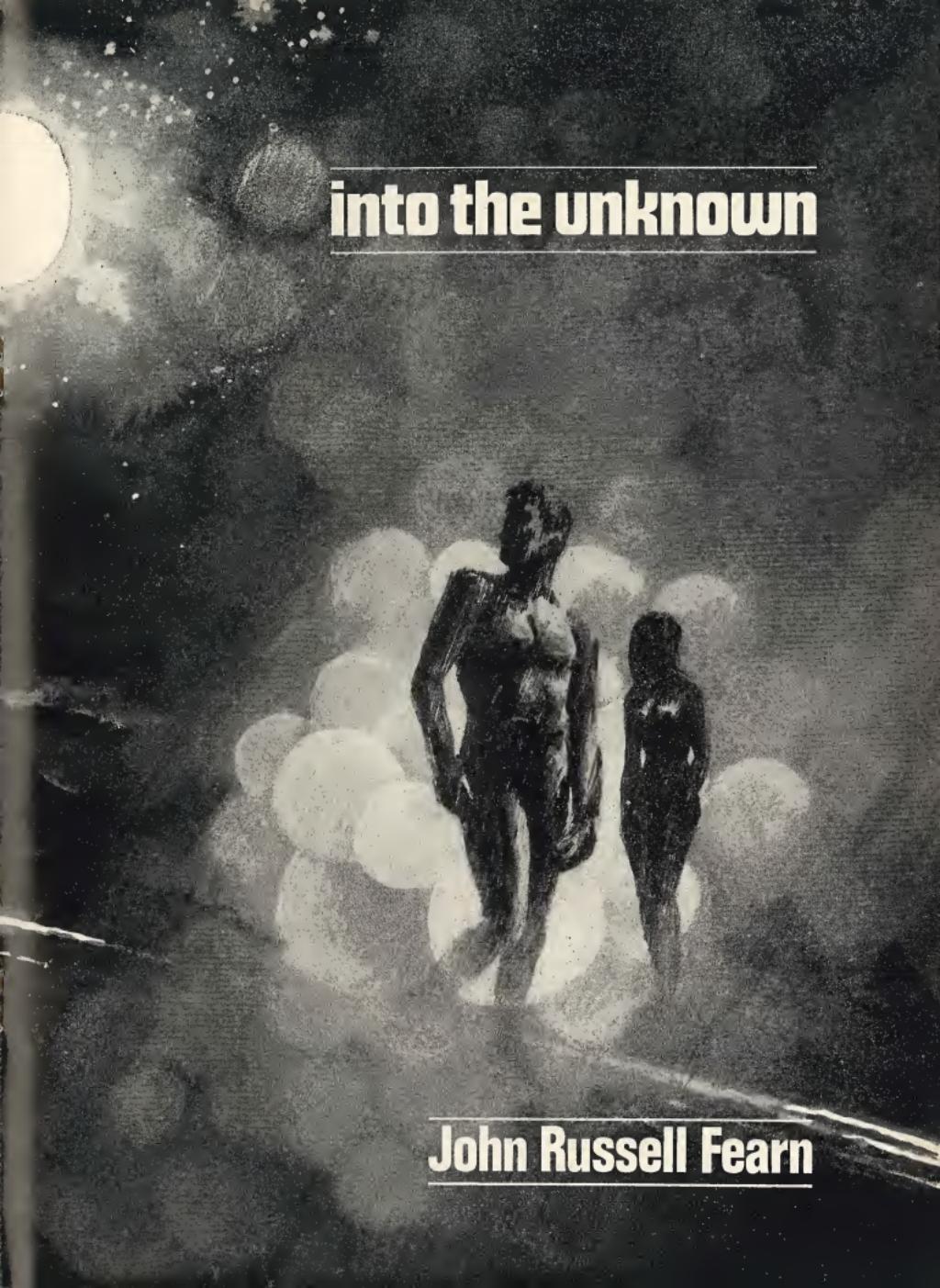
In 1955, it was discovered that strong radio waves were coming from the giant planet. Unfortunately this did not mean that inhabitants were trying to signal us, but it was very exciting nonetheless for radio astronomers. It was also a surprise though, for no one had expected a cold planet to generate radio waves: the phenomenon is usually associated with intensely hot stars, like the Sun. It may be that Jupiter does generate some heat of its own, but most of the radio noise comes from a region high above its equator, which means that, like the Earth, it is surrounded by radiation belts. Then there are occasional outbursts which sound very much like thunderstorms static, but they are incredibly strong—a single second of these contains the power of a hundred billion lightning flashes on Earth! Jupiter's 'radio voice' must reach well beyond the solar system.

Why do these storms of hissing and cracklings come at such irregular intervals? It has been noticed that they are more frequent than usual when Io, the nearest major satellite, is in certain positions in its orbit—could it be that this triggers them? And if so, how? It is known that our own moon sweeps up charged particles from the Sun as it travels in its orbit, leaving a sort of magnetic wake behind it. Since Io is about as big as our moon, and passes through Jupiter's magnetic field, perhaps it does in some way affect the charged particles that are circulating there, making them plunge down from the radiation belt into the top of the atmosphere, where they suddenly stop and emit part of their energy as radio waves.

Within the next ten years probes will find out much more about this fascinating planet and its family of moons.



•EDDIE JONES•



into the unknown

John Russell Fearn

Within the home of Doctor Cassell Thurman, physicist, reigned the joyous abandon of a New Year party. What was more, it was also the first marriage anniversary of his daughter Ann, and Rodney Shenstone.

'It surprises me, Doc, that a savant like yourself should be able to enjoy a party,' Shenstone commented, during an interval in the almost continuous round of drinks and rising merriment. 'You disprove all the old theories about scientists being cold-blooded.'

Thurman smiled faintly, tossing aside on the mantle-shelf a small chamois-leather bag, which he had been absentively examining.

'Scientists are as human as anybody else,' he answered in his grave voice; then, as his eyes rested on his daughter's slender figure amidst the guests, his voice took on a new animation. 'Besides, I'd do anything for Ann, Rodney . . . Anything!'

'And I,' her husband added, slightly uncomfortable. Thurman had been a widower for the past seven years. 'Still, for all that, I can't help but feel you've got a double motive in throwing this party. I mean, despite it being our anniversary and New Year's Eve—'

'Yes, I have a motive,' Thurman assented, dropping his voice somewhat as the radio dance music ceased for an instant. 'At five minutes to midnight I'm going to show you all my latest invention.'

Rodney evinced little surprise. As a Research scientist working for the Government, Thurman's reputation in atomic physics had been unmatched. Although he had officially retired some years ago, he still continued his own private research. That he had been working on an especial 'something' Rodney knew full well, as his son-in-law.

'Yes, tonight is an ideal occasion to reveal the secrets of Time,' Thurman continued cryptically. 'Being New Year's Eve, I mean.'

'Time?' Rodney's own radio-engineering instincts were aroused. A blond, slightly chubby young man, he had a much higher intellectual quota than one would have imagined. As resident maintenance engineer with the World Broadcasting Corporation he could not afford to be a fool. 'Don't tell me it's the fourth dimension!' he chuckled. The older man shook his head.

'No, my boy—anything but it. Besides, this isn't a time-travelling system; that's out of the question. It's something else, which postulates the possibilities lying in space itself. It ought to—we'll discuss it later. Here's Ann.'

The girl herself, ash-blonde and twenty-four, came forward with an impish tread. Her wide grey eyes were sparkling mischievously. She patted her father affectionately on the summit of his nearly-bald cranium.

'Dad, it's twenty minutes to midnight,' she said, apparently with some effort. It was more than obvious that she had not abstained from drinking liqueurs and cocktails. 'You promised me something at five to twelve. What is it? Another present?'

'My dear Ann, you've had your present,' the Doctor reminded her, indicating her gold wrist-watch. 'Besides, what do you expect for one year only? Keep it up for twenty years, and maybe I'll leave you my fortune . . . No, it's not a second present,' he continued, coming down to the issue. 'It is the—er—preview of my invention. An invention with immense possibilities. It's in the laboratory across the way. As you and Rod know, I've been working in secret for some years now.'

Ann wrinkled her nose in disfavour. 'Do we have to go into that smelly old place?' she complained. 'I don't like the things you have lying about.' She paused, then her grey eyes opening wider in purely girlish curiosity she asked, 'What have you got tucked away in there anyway? You've never told anybody anything.'

Thurman chuckled good naturedly. 'I will soon enough. I'll be handing over full details to government experts. But meanwhile—' he raised his hand for quiet. The radio and record player were respectfully silenced and the guests ceased talking.

'My friends, you're going to behold something extraordinary,' he announced. 'Follow me into my laboratory.. There will be a demonstration shortly at five to twelve.'

He moved to the interconnecting door of the immense drawing room and flung it open. The guests followed interestedly—some chanting close-harmony, others a trifle more serious—but certainly all of them were unclined for anything particularly erudite. Ann herself was none too precise in her gait; she felt unaccountably heady and prompted towards titters of laughter for no apparent reason. She felt glad of Rodney's hand at her elbow; it did at least save things from walking into her.

Entering the laboratory, Thurman switched on the light and, in silence, motioned the guests around him. He stood gazing with fond pride upon a truly massive machine supported on pillars of solid concrete, perhaps a couple of feet from the floor. In some aspects the gigantic instrument—from floor to ceiling almost—resembled an ultra-technical television transmitter, except that at one end it was mainly square in shape, and apparently encased in lead. At one side was a control board of sorts, and an impressive array of switches and buttons. Most incredible of all was an utterly incongruous potted plant flourishing below a lensed projection near the centre of the machine.

'What is it?' ventured Bertie Vincent, with his habitual nervous giggle, holding his wine-glass at a forty-five degree angle, regardless of its contents.

'In one way it is a Time-machine,' said Thurman. 'Time itself, I have proven, is an impossible condition in which to travel by the medium of the Time-machine of popular fiction. But it is possible to alter the nature of Time itself.'

'Nature of Time?' repeated Ann, swaying gently on her toes. 'What's that?'

'Time is in the form of an ever-flowing sea—a sea filling all space, in which our Earth, the solar system,

and the rest of the universe, has floated for countless aeons. As the Earth, and all other bodies pass through it, this Time Stream, as one might call it, causes the process we know as progress. A series of events, in which everything passes through a state of Change, and no action can ever repeat itself. All actions, events, represent the *progress* of the objects—or people—involved. And the medium for progress is Time.

'But, by sending into this limitless sea an opposing force it is possible to send this Time-sea flowing backwards, much the same as strong wind will dispel a fog and cause it to retreat over the place where it was formerly progressing.'

'What would happen to human beings in this process?' Rodney asked.

'Nothing happens to thinking organisms—at least not in the short intervals I propose using. The human being is something unique in the nature of the universe in that we possess Free Will. Whilst we are caught up in the universal Time-stream we do not "travel" in the same way as inanimate objects. Of course—' Thurman broke off, suddenly conscious of an undercurrent of murmuring and coughing in the small assembly. It was clear that few—if any—of them had the slightest idea what he was talking about. He looked appealingly at Rodney in the awkward silence.

'You mean,' Rodney said slowly, 'that your machine can make everything inorganic go backwards? Like trees and plants—?' he broke off in astonishment, turning to regard the potted plant in the midst of the apparatus. At first, he had thought it must have been left there by mistake.

'Exactly. Now, if you are ready, I'll give you a brief demonstration . . .' Thurman had evidently decided that action was much more preferable to exposition. He paused as he caught sight of Bertie Vincent jabbing a wavering finger towards the machine. 'I want to know what good it is. You say it doesn't affect us physically. By that, I suppose you mean we'll see fragments of the past without going there.'

'Correct.' Thurman's voice was calm, although his lips were compressed.

'Well, it isn't as though we could view the future! That would be worth having! But as it is I see no value in the thing at all,' he concluded, with solemn decision.

'A person like you wouldn't, Bertie,' Thurman returned drily. 'The precise value of the machine lies in its ability to discover geological data and have it properly tabulated. Past earthly formations can be checked by experts. Of course, creatures that have lived and died will no longer be visible, within the scope of the forces I propose using.'

'Now, I want you to watch that potted plant.' Thurman moved to his control board, and began to activate switches. There was a faint hum from his apparatus, but that was all.

'Can I help?' Ann asked, then as her father did not appear to hear her she disengaged her arm from Rodney's steady hand, and moved rather rockily forward.

'It's a funny looking thing, isn't it?' she went on, with a giggle. Thurman ignored her, intent on his work.

'All of you—look at the plant!' he snapped, turning away from the switchboard. Ann turned too, frowning, but remained where she was.

A peculiar thing was happening to the plant. It seemed to be waving in an invisible breeze, then gradually it began to shrink. The leaves and blossom disappeared into thin shoots, like blades of grass. For a moment a single green shoot peeped above the soil—which did not seem to be affected unduly—and then abruptly it disappeared.

'Where—where did it go to?' Bertie's voice rose steadily.

Before Thurman could answer, Ann's voice came from beside the switchboard. 'Don't worry, Bertie. I saw which switch Dad pressed to start it. I'll bring it back for you.' She giggled, and reeled unsteadily forward. Her fingers closed on a prominent blue switch.

Thurman started violently as he beheld the position of his daughter's hand.

'Ann!' he shouted hoarsely, leaping forward. 'Get away, you little fool!'

He clutched her arm desperately, but his very action precipitated what he was striving to avoid. Ann staggered, but did not relax her grip on the switch. She snapped it clean over in its slot.

Instantly things began to happen. The muted hum of the machine changed to a deafening scream, which cut off dead almost immediately. In that same moment, the needles upon the dials affixed to the main switchboard flickered over to zero and stopped. A few seconds later the lights went out. A faint light remained, sufficient to see adequately for perhaps ten feet. It came from the skylight above.

The onlookers in the front gasped. The plant pot had completely disappeared even as they watched.

Ann, slightly sobered, staggered free of her father's grip. Rodney, coming forward, clutched her tightly.

'What's happened, Dad?' she asked blankly. 'Have I done something wrong?'

Thurman did not answer. He merely looked at her.

'Why are you looking at me like that? Why—?'

An incredible expression had settled on Thurman's seamed face. It was something akin to loathing and disgust. He seemed to have aged, and for a moment a light of madness danced in his eyes. He took a step forward towards Ann. Immediately Rodney barred his way. 'Now take it easy, Doctor. Ann didn't—' he broke off uncertainly as Thurman suddenly buried his face in his hands.

'Ann, oh Ann, why on earth did you have to do that?' Then, pulling himself together, Thurman turned to the assembly of guests amidst the gloom of the big laboratory.

'I want you all to try and keep calm whilst I tell you something. First, come back into the drawing room.' Somewhat unnerved, the guests filed back through the open doorway into the light and warmth—then, fear

getting the better of sense, Bertie Vincent made a dash for the door.

'Let's get out of here! Something horrible has happened—I know it has!'

He made to seize the door handle, then fell back with a yelp of alarm. Round-eyed, he looked back at the others. 'I can't touch it!' he breathed hoarsely. 'Come on, somebody, and give me a hand.'

'Come back here, Bertie, and calm down,' ordered Thurman steadily. There was an odd note of command in his voice. 'We've got to face this thing squarely—'

'Father!' Ann exclaimed, gazing fixedly at her wrist. 'Father! My watch is going *backwards*. My brand new gold watch.'

Thurman went over to the girl's side. For quite a minute he stood motionless, his eyes fixed on the bright new dial. Then, as he traced the slow but perceptible backward crawl of the hour hand, he swung round to the others.

'Look at your watches!' he requested curtly. 'There's something happening now that substantiates my worst fears beyond all doubt, I'm afraid. Keep a steady eye on your watches, then tell me what you find.'

Hardly daring to imagine what they would behold, the others obeyed—or rather tried to obey. For some curious reason those men owning pocket watches found it impossible to drag them from their pockets. Those owning wrist watches were equally baffled. Beyond question every watch was going backwards.

'Yes, backwards,' Thurman told them. He looked round at the room clock. 'It was five to twelve when we entered the laboratory. Now it is twenty five to—'

'Doc, don't just stand there talking like that!' Bertie shouted hysterically. 'Tell us what has really happened!'

'I have made a fatal mistake,' Thurman answered, a slight tremor in his voice. 'To reverse the flow of Time requires tremendous power. My machine, with its self-contained atomic power unit, has that power. But, to operate at all, the energies used must be transmitted at full strength. The outflowing radiations from my machine are capable of transmitting themselves clear across the solar system—'

'But—but the demonstration,' Rodney faltered. 'That was to encompass only that potted plant beside the machine, wasn't it?'

'That's correct, Rod. And that was my fatal mistake,' Thurman said thickly. 'My machine also threw out a force-field, a containing web of force that limited the Time-reversing radiations to a small area. Before activating those radiations I threw the switch that set up the force field.'

Rodney's brain was racing. 'So when Ann reversed the switch she had seen you operate initially, it was *not* the switch that started the machine proper, but the force field? She—she switched it off!' he whispered, a note of horror in his voice. He put his arm about his wife's shoulders, as Ann buried her face in his chest.

There was a stunned silence.

'Don't you understand, all of you?' Thurman

appealed. 'The full power of the machine enveloped the whole laboratory—the city—the whole Earth. Then, out into space. It happened almost instantly, at the speed of light.'

'I should have built in additional safeguards to the machine,' Thurman added, as Ann looked up at him, remorse and self-guilt seared across her face. 'Made the force-field automatic.'

'Why can't you do something about it?' Bertie yelled. 'Undo the damage somehow?'

Thurman looked at him disgustedly. 'Because,' he said deliberately, 'the moment the force field shut off, what was present time in the laboratory immediately became *past* time! I cannot touch or affect the machine in any way. Hence the reason why we saw the dials registering zero; the machine had regressed to the time before I switched it on. Similarly with our watches. And that's why you couldn't open the door. It just wasn't open at that instant in past time, same as some watches were inside pockets. Time has placed between us and material things a thin curtain of unbreakable vibration. We can't open doors, we can't even handle our clothes. Nothing can happen to objects save that which has already happened.'

'And what about us? What about human beings?' Rodney questioned.

'So far anything that is organic—a thinking creature—is not affected. To do so required a higher order of vibration than my machine was set to. There are many reasons for this, such as Free Will—a thinking being can transfer itself from place to place of its own volition. Inanimate objects can progress only due to natural forces—' he broke off impatiently. 'All this is purely academic, anyhow. In any case, there's no guarantee but what as the Time reversal gathers momentum, human beings may not be caught up in it as well.'

'Then how do we get out of here?' someone demanded fiercely.

Thurman looked at him. 'When the time comes again that the door was last opened—about 9.30 I think it was—it will open of its own accord. We can then get through the doorway. Meanwhile, the Time reversal will continue. There is no means of checking it, of building a machine to neutralise the effect, as is theoretically possible. To do that would mean progress, the handling of machinery. It just can't be done. My machine, and Ann's foolhardy action, has changed the entire course of Time.'

'But light from the fire; electric light—sound . . . All seem to be normal,' Rodney muttered, thinking hard.

The physicist shrugged. 'Light waves from the fire are reversed. We're getting past impressions. Sound from human voices, from all *living* creatures, will be normal. Our vocal chords are operating in the present. But ordinary sounds will be in reverse.'

'And electric light? I can't get the hang of that at all.'

'I agree that seems paradoxical,' Thurman answered. 'We are having light because it existed at this time before, but actually power-houses are creating it in a past

time. Those power-house generators will be untouchable. Yet they'll keep going unaided, because they're merely repeating what they've already done.' Thurman was becoming visibly weary; he passed a hand across his eyes, then sank down heavily into a nearby armchair.

Instantly he noticed that he was not actually touching it. He was separated from it by perhaps an inch of invisible vibration. The springs did not depress, nor did his agitated, pounding hands leave any dents in the chair's upholstery. Indeed, within the whole room nobody's feet really touched the carpet; again there was that invisible separation.

Thurman rose in exasperation. 'When the doors in the house open, you must all go to your homes. Try and keep calm. In the daylight I will attempt to study out the difficulties that beset us . . . You, Ann, should go upstairs to your old room and try to sleep.' He looked into her haggard eyes. 'I'm afraid you need it! You, Rod, will please stay here and talk with me. As an engineer you might find it possible to assist me.'

'Fair enough,' Rodney responded, then drew the now faintly sobbing Ann to him.

The silence of the dead fell on the dazed assembly. A few of the guests were dumbfoundedly aware that their glasses had mysteriously left their hands. They were now back on the sideboard, spirited away by an invisible agency. And they were dry and clean, whereas not moments before they had been filled nearly to the brim!

Those in Thurman's New York residence could hardly have been expected to perceive the sudden and remarkable things that had happened in the outside world when Time halted in its onward progress.

Instantly everything inanimate ceased to progress. Every living creature could conceive the future, but was balked in the effort to make that future possible.

Beyond doubt, Ann Shenstone's hand had ended Time. Every clock on Earth was going backwards. The oceans that had been at flood tide suddenly started to ebb before reaching high-water mark, going back over the order they had just covered and leaving dry sand behind them!

Every vehicle in the world stopped almost instantly, hurling many people headlong through space ahead of the vehicle, which then pursued a backward course of reverse motion. Thousands were killed outright.

For a second the world was plunged into infinite darkness. The moon and stars vanished; the heavens became an inky vault—then light resumed, bringing with it an astounding revelation.

In America, where the moon had just been rising, it was now going back into the east again. The entire solar system was in reverse.

Every living soul was dumbfounded with amazement and horror at the things that had come to pass. Fortunately humans were unaffected in themselves, and the vast majority of people were alive to witness the chaos around them.

There was a singular case in Sydney where workmen were dynamiting a defunct grain warehouse. They had depressed the explosive switch and seen the entire battered edifice smash into a thousand pieces. Then the end of Time hit them . . . They actually saw the lever on the explosive-switch shoot back into position, heard the sound of the explosion in reverse. Most amazing of all was the sight of the warehouse back exactly as it was to commence with, having risen to its former condition from the shattered debris. The workmen doubted their sanity and promptly went on strike.

All over the world, other shiftings were taking place, but back in New York, Doctor Thurman and Rodney knew nothing of the happenings. Once the doors had opened, the guests had left hurriedly. They departed into quiet and curiously deserted streets, treading on ground that was not ground at all but something invisibly solid. Ann, shaken by the knowledge that she was indirectly responsible for everything, went upstairs to the room she had occupied before her marriage. After an interval the bedroom door opened, and she passed inside. The door shut relentlessly behind her.

Downstairs, Rodney and Thurman talked ceaselessly—all to no avail.

'We can do absolutely nothing!' Thurman declared finally. 'Progress has ceased. For a little while we shall be able to eat foodstuffs, because being organic—although dead—they are unaffected by the reversal. But we shall have to eat them before they vanish to the place we got them from. If we eat them first we'll stop that, naturally. Thank God inorganic things alone are affected!'

'Fortunately we've chicken, turkey—all sorts of good things on hand for the festive season,' Rodney reflected. 'How about drinking though? That's a point.'

Thurman nodded. 'It certainly is. I've just been thinking it over. Everything is quite untouched—including water. Milk is the only substitute, coming from an organic creature. I've some skin gourds up in the lumber room which will be similarly unaffected. We'll have to get the milk into those. They're pretty clean, as it happens. I used them once on an exploration trip. The milk may go sour, of course, but we can't pick and choose.'

'Going to be darned difficult,' Rodney remarked. 'As I see it, the very bottles in which the milk is standing will be untouchable, even though the actual milk isn't. Besides, the bottles will go back finally to where they came from.'

'We can take care of that,' Thurman answered thoughtfully, picking up the chamois-leather bag with which he had been idly toying earlier in the evening. 'This is my watch-pouch. I'd just had it cleaned, but since I can't get at my watch in my pocket, it's useless for that purpose any longer.'

'What's that got to do with milk?' Rodney asked, a trifle testily.

'Isn't it obvious, Rod? This pouch is skin from the chamois, the European antelope. We can use it as a ladle. Slow work, but very necessary. The moment this

door here opens again we'll get those gourds from the box-room. Meantime we might go into the laboratory . . . I'd like to see how things are going on in there.'

As they turned towards the connecting door the electric light switch turned itself to 'Off', and the window blinds shot up.

'Good God, it's—it's yesterday afternoon!' Thurman exclaimed, swinging round. 'See there—the sun is *rising* in the west!'

Somewhat dazed, the two men passed into the laboratory as the connecting door suddenly opened.

Thurman stood in contemplative silence before the Time-reverser, then he pointed. 'See there—the rivets are disappearing.' He indicated the terminals from which the nuts were visibly vanishing with every passing moment, leaving loose ends of wire which also began to become non-existent as the minutes passed.

Struck by a sudden thought he went across to a divided tray on the bench and peered amongst the innumerable odds and ends.

'They're here—where I took them from,' he remarked, smiling faintly.

'All reversed time,' Thurman continued. 'I put those bolts on at exactly this time yesterday. That time has now returned, hence the bolts have returned to their original place. They *had* to, otherwise they'd be in two places at once.'

'But, damn it, nobody touched them! You carried them there in the first place, surely?'

'How they've returned is nothing to do with it,' Thurman said firmly. 'Things simply cease to be in one place when the time has expired and return to the previous spot.'

Rodney stood digesting the paradox in silence for a while. Then he swung round and seized Thurman's arm tightly. 'Doc, we can't stand about here like a couple of fools! We've got to do something!'

Thurman shrugged. 'How?' he asked, in an empty voice. 'Between us and the world we understand is the complex dimension between past and present. Everything about us is apart from us, like a slowly changing dream—yet real, alive, and terrible.'

'Hell! No drinks or cigarettes,' Rodney said blankly, suddenly recalling personal indulgences. Then, 'See here Doctor. How come the radiations from your machine are still existent?'

'Simple. The radiations never existed this time yesterday—have never existed before. That is why they exist now—and will exist—right into past time, because to them it is their only existence. You follow?'

'H'mm. I suppose you're right.' Rodney did not look too convinced. 'All this, because Ann had too much to drink last night,' Thurman added, frowning.

Rodney looked at him steadily. 'You can't blame her, Doc. She was only having a good time, like the rest of us. You should never have made your infernal machine in the first place.'

Thurman sighed and turned heavy eyes to the slowly vanishing machine.

'Probably you're right . . . Well, I'm going to try and get into that box-room. Once we've done that milk job I'll get a little sleep—you too, Rod. You need it. When we're refreshed we'll see how we can face up to things. How to live in a world without progress . . .'

The milk transference finally accomplished, Rodney waited for the bedroom door to open. He found his wife fully dressed and obviously very much alarmed, sitting in the centre of a neatly made bed. There was no sign of depression from the weight of her body.

'Oh, Rod, I've been so scared! Things keep happening by magic. When I came up here to go to bed I couldn't get my clothes off. My hands seemed to go through them instead of holding them. I tried to get my watch off and couldn't—' she broke off as Rodney came forward and took her hand. Suddenly he frowned.

'Your watch? It's gone. I thought you said—'

'That's *it!*' Ann cried agitatedly. 'It just disappeared whilst I was looking at it. Then I tried to get into the bed, but my hands seemed to go through the bedclothes. I lay on top of them for a while. I guess I must have slept for a while. But when I woke up I was dressed in this morning frock, instead of my evening dress! Rod, what's happening?'

Rodney hugged her affectionately.

'It does seem weird,' he agreed. 'Matter of fact, it's now yesterday! That's why you couldn't get your things off—they were *on* at that time yesterday evening, at the party. The bed too would be made at a different time again, and couldn't be altered. Then your clothes changed of their own accord whilst you slept, because yesterday at this time you had that dress on. That time has come round again now. You see?'

The girl shook her head vehemently. 'No! I don't see! Why do these things happen? How is it your clothes haven't changed?'

Rodney shrugged. 'Purely because I had this suit on all day yesterday and all night. Suddenly, I expect, I'll find myself in pyjamas,' he grinned cynically. 'It's a terrible mess,' he went on more seriously. 'Who knows what's going to happen as things go on?'

'And I did it,' the girl muttered, staring through the window. 'I did it. I was crazy last night, Rod; had too much to drink. Why on earth didn't you stop me. You know what a fool I am when I get too much to drink—'

'Forget it,' Rodney snapped. 'I guess we were *all* crazy last night—your father more so than anybody, with his damned machine.'

'But it hasn't got to go on, has it?' Ann demanded tensely. 'Rod, tell me the truth!'

'It will go on. Time is going backwards, and unless a miracle happens, it will continue to do so—' he ceased speaking as Ann suddenly threw her arms round him. He held her close for a very long time.

The biggest catastrophes in history, the greatest storms, the most extensive floods, and the worst earthquakes . . . all paled into entire insignificance by comparison with

this new and titanic problem which smote the world when Mankind tried to resume normalcy.

Although, ordinarily, it would have been New Year's day, the disturbances manifest at home led most people to investigate further. On every hand they encountered the solid wall of stagnation. Everything had come to an end.

Baffled newspaper editors surveyed mute telephones, sat indeed before desks that had upon them constantly shifting papers, all passing through the motions the editor himself had created for them in preceding time. When telephones could not even be handled, newspaper presses started on their own account and printed the previous day's news, and even one's prized cigars could not be touched, the entire literary section of the world panicked. Reporters stranded in forsaken spots near various nerve-centres of the earth wandered around in a daze, desperately trying to fathom how he or she could bring the news to the ears of their respective editors. They were quite unaware that the same events were in force the world over.

The ships at sea had the most uncanny experience of all. When Time had ended they had suddenly stopped in their forward movement, and instead travelled as though through a hazy cloud. Within the cloud, there was very little sense of motion. Finally they entered mundane surroundings again at the point where they had started. Hardly had the passengers had time to jump ashore—by any means they could, for gangplanks could not be used—before the various ships involved had mysteriously faded and vanished, pursuing an ever backward course along the journeys they had previously made. In some instances hundreds of people were taken with them, literally swept into the limbo of forgotten things.

Tragedy, multiple and ever-mounting, stalked across the reversed world.

Similarly curious happenings occurred with trains. They merged back to their starting point. Porters and platelayers alike found it impossible to proceed with their usual work. Nobody seemed to know whether it was yesterday, today or tomorrow.

Other happenings were embarrassing rather than tragic. The world over, people found themselves changing clothes without visible aid. They found themselves in night and day clothes at unexpected moments, as they passed again—so far as the clothes were concerned—over the identical seconds. One leading politician left his home immaculate when Time changed to attend a New Year party of Top People. The later reversal in time finally brought him to wearing running shorts, in which he had performed slimming exercises before leaving his residence. Fortunately it was quite impossible to print his remarks.

Once the shiftings and returnings had to some extent passed away, the fact became evident that nothing could move forward. All cars went, driverless, through hazy backward movements to their garages or starting points. Then they reappeared in streets, only to fade

again, ceaselessly. In several cases, new autos and locomotives reappeared in the makers' shops and engine-sheds respectively, after which they went through a steady process of dismantlement of their own accord. Their various parts were apparently lost as they moved back to their original state . . .

The only people on earth who were not mightily handicapped were the astronomers. Their telescopes, guided to follow the heavens by clockwork, naturally went backwards in keeping with the similar backward motion of the solar system. Unfortunately three famous astronomers became mildly insane trying to solve the riddle; others went on desperately trying to compute what had occurred. So far as they could make out, time was moving faster, backwards, the earth apparently revolving now at just over 20 hours, against the old 24. Man, trained from infancy to realise how long a day was, failed utterly to understand why the sun had taken to rising in the west, or why it moved so rapidly across the winter heavens.

The astronomers tried to communicate their knowledge to the press, with no success. They had to resort to word of mouth. Radio, of course, was equally useless. The ancient process of sending news by runners was revived. Trained athletes volunteered to do the work for a given fee, ran countless miles across the vibratory floor with which the world was covered. Ran, only to discover that not only could their fee not be given them, but it would have been useless even if it could . . .

Gradually, Man began to realise the cardinal tragedy that had struck him.

Although, in a literal sense, it was a world without progress, events were happening constantly. Everywhere, every minute, the skyline was changing. Buildings that had been pulled down were reappearing by degrees; others were disappearing. No longer was it safe to go anywhere, so various populations prepared for migration to the open spaces where they would at least stand a chance.

Finding that animals could be obtained and killed, Man did not need further instruction. Sheep were strangled by strong men, and despite an initial repugnance, had to be eaten raw. Fire would not kindle, so cooking was out. These methods applied chiefly to the vast average classes, who were stricken with mortal panic. The more intelligent remained behind in the changing, baffling cities to try and think out other methods of procedure.

Since no known cosmic law fitted in with the reversal in Time, scientists began to claim that the occurrence was not a natural one. So, once again, messengers were sent amongst the people, demanding that the creator of this disaster should come forward. The news failed to reach Doctor Thurman himself, but it did reach Bertie Vincent. Vincent, having already been scared out of his few wits by these proceedings, sought the local police chief of the New York East Division.

"I tell you he's a madman!" he declared to Chief

Inspector Barker, when he had finally managed to enter the police station. 'With my own eyes I saw the machine switched on. After that clocks started to go backwards.'

'You wouldn't try to fool me, would you?' the chief asked heavily. 'God knows I've had enough explanations about this nutty business. Still, you might just have something. Where can I find this Doctor Thurman?'

'I'll take you to him.'

For a moment the chief considered, then nodded. 'Okay, I'll come with you. Guess we'll have to walk; the auto's no use. Come on.'

Fifteen minutes brought them to the Doctor's home and Barker hammered impetuously on the door. At least, this was what he tried to do, but the invisible vibration between only stung his knuckles and gave forth no sound.

'Hell!' he muttered, nursing his tingling knuckles. 'Guess this infernal invisible stuff is enough to drive a guy out of his mind. What are we—'

He broke off, staring, as he caught a glimpse of a round face and bald head through the glass of the bay window. It disappeared almost instantly, then a voice came from beyond the front door.

'I can let you in as soon as the door opens,' Thurman shouted. 'Sorry, but that's all there is for it.'

'Darned humbug,' the officer growled, then cocked a suspicious eye on Bertie. 'Say, how did you get into the police station when doors can't be opened by ordinary methods?'

'Probably because the door of the police station is rarely shut—not in the big centres, anyhow,' Bertie replied mildly. Barker gave a grunt of disgust.

'Okay, so we wait,' he said. Then, after a pause, in an odd voice, he added: 'Do you have much difficulty with your clothes?'

'Sure I do. They keep changing without me doing anything—but I'm getting used to it. By roughly calculating the time backwards I can tell when the change will come and what I'll have on. The biggest worry though is food. I haven't had a bite to eat, or a drink, since—Oh, I don't know when. A long time.'

'Same here,' the officer growled. 'My wife and kids, and myself; we haven't had a thing since New Year's Eve. Guess this crazy guy in here's got a lot to answer for—Hey, quick! The door's opening!'

He stood alert as he saw the knob turn, then as the door swung back he charged into the hall with Bertie beside him. A moment later the door swung closed again.

Bertie saw that the Doctor himself, Ann and Rodney were all present in the hall, attired exactly as they had been at that time two days ago. Hence Thurman was in an overall stained with chemicals, Ann in a greasy old dress in which she had been cleaning her small runabout, and Rodney in a comparatively respectable everyday suit. Then, even as the astounded officer and Bertie watched, Rodney's tie suddenly changed from a bright new one to an old and faded one. The young man

grinned slightly as he noticed the change. Of course, he *had* changed the wretched thing. The new one he had bought was now gone forever.

'Which of you two gentlemen is Doctor Thurman?' the officer demanded, nearly closing one eye—evidently under the impression this facial distortion would add weight to his enquiry.

Thurman stepped forward. 'I am, inspector. Why?'

'This gentleman here tells me you're responsible for the unholy mess that's going on. Is that right?'

'Bertie, you damned—' began Rodney, clenching his fist.

'Well, I didn't see any harm in telling him!' Bertie protested. 'After all, the creator of the trouble was asked to step forward. I got wind of it and told the police.'

'Why couldn't you have told me?' Thurman demanded.

'Well—er—'

'I know, you thought I was safer under lock and key, eh?' Thurman smiled bitterly. 'I know you think I'm half mad, Bertie; you always did. Well, what if I am? What do you propose doing, officer? Certainly I made the machine that is the cause of this trouble, but it was an accident that started the whole thing.'

'Scientists are asking you to step forward and try to see what can be done to remedy things,' the inspector explained carefully. 'Are you prepared to do so?'

'I would do so willingly if there was a ghost of a chance of righting things—but there isn't. I know—to my cost!'

'Then I'll have to put you in charge,' the inspector declared flatly. 'I still have my duty to do.'

'You mean put me in prison?' Thurman asked quietly, then he burst into a chuckle as Chief Inspector Barker nodded complacently.

'What's so funny?'

'Just that you can't do a thing! Don't you realise that we're plunging backwards in time? You can't get hold of anything; you can't do anything. Why, before very long, the very prisons themselves will be falling to pieces; arriving back at the time they were built.'

'Hell, I never thought of that.' Barker was dazed. 'It's the same sort of thing that stops us eating, isn't it?'

Thurman seemed to decide something. 'Haven't you had any food since this thing began?' he asked quietly.

'No, neither me nor my family. I don't know how much longer we can go on.'

'We had nothing, either,' remarked Bertie aggrievedly.

'If I give you a cold chicken, inspector, and a gourd of milk—unfortunately sour, but none the less drinkable—will you do me a favour?'

'Depends what it is.'

'You can't pick and choose, my friend. An empty stomach and a starving family are ruthless masters. Law and order have gone by the board, and we are all creatures facing a common foe—existence! I'm willing to give you food and drink to take home with you, in return for a service.'

For an instant Barker hesitated; then he nodded. 'Okay—what is it?'

'At the moment you still have some vestiges of authority. I want you to round up as many of your men as you can. Next, get all the civilians you can contact between you into the park opposite my home here. Can you do that, Inspector?'

'I guess so. But what—'

'I want to address them,' Thurman interrupted impatiently. 'It's time the people of this city at least knew what they were facing. Get all the people you can into the park by sunset. Sunset in the east, of course.'

'All right, Doctor. I'll do my best. Meantime . . .'

Thurman smiled. 'Ah, yes, the food. Come this way . . . you too, Bertie. I'll see that you get something as well. Even though you are nothing but a damned nuisance. Still, you've done an unwitting good turn.'

Rodney and Ann, left alone in the hall, glanced at each other.

'Rod, where is all this going to end? The strain of trying to remember what happened on such-and-such a day is appalling. I just can't keep it up!'

'You were cleaning your car,' Rodney smiled. 'Your clothes prove it. It's no use worrying about it, Ann. Pretty soon nobody will be able to remember a thing with any certainty. Only thing is to try and remember the most important happenings, and prepare for them coming back.'

'To think I helped to cause it,' Ann murmured in a low voice. For a moment she was close to tears. 'Oh Rod, I wish I was going backwards in Time as well—then I'd return to zero and be no more. What is there left to live for in a world like this? For me—the one who brought it all about?'

Rodney looked at her fixedly. 'Don't talk like that,' he said quietly. 'Besides, who knows, in the end we might start going forward again. There's also the chance of humans becoming affected eventually. Your father mentioned the possibility, you know.'

'It's all horrible!' Ann was near to tears again, then she paused as her father returned.

'Well, they've both gone,' Thurman announced. 'Had to wait for the rear door to open. I gave them a gourd of our milk and some cold chicken between them—I think Bertie's got some idea of living in with him. Like everybody else, it doesn't matter where he lives. There's no family life any more.'

'This meeting,' Rodney asked, 'what's the idea of it?'

'If I can get some of the people together, then I stand a chance to try and formulate some new laws to meet the emergency. As instigator of this mess, it's up to me to do something. Mankind will have to return to tribal law.'

'Ultimately, if things go on, there'll be no cities—nothing. Even the land will start to change, because the backward rate is increasing enormously. The days and nights are becoming shorter. The whole thing is ghastly—I don't like it!'

'Who does?' Ann asked bitterly.

Chief Inspector Barker, after a brief triumphal return home with the foodstuffs, kept his promise. He and such other policemen who had reported for duty duly proceeded to herd all the civilians within sight into Willow Park. Sick with hunger and bafflement, they offered little protest. The sight of his uniform and the promise that a scientist would speak to them, try and aid them, was sufficient to instil obedience. By sundown the park was packed, and Thurman himself, Ann and Rodney beside him, eventually arrived.

Thurman selected a disused fountain for an address platform, and by dint of hoarse shouting, tried to make clear to the multitude what had happened.

'We are at a point in human life where science cannot aid us!' he shouted, husky with voice-strain. 'We have only two means of sustenance—milk and animals. With our bare hands we shall have to kill sheep, hens, rabbits, pigs, and so forth. I doubt if any of us can kill a cow or horse bare-handed, but we might as well try it. We cannot use instruments to aid us.'

'You are finding your clothes constantly changing. When your stock of clothes has run out, which they will do rapidly because we are living slower than the Change about us, you will find yourselves stark naked. Those of you who can obtain fur coats had better do so; steal them if need be. They alone will not disappear, because they belong to an organic animal.'

'Why fur coats, with summer coming?' yelled a voice.

Thurman gestured impatiently. 'When will you people realise that everything is in reverse?' he demanded. 'The reversal started on December 31st; it is not now January 4th, but December 28th! We've got to live back through the winter we've passed. Seasons are now exactly the opposite.'

'How are we going to live? What are we going to do?' screamed a woman near the front of the crowd.

'You can all go to your respective homes,' Thurman answered. 'They will be safe enough until such time as they were first built; after that they will vanish, of course . . . The strongest amongst you must get to work right away and obtain food. What you obtain can be placed in the nearest abattoirs—then inform me. We can then try and work out some method of distribution.'

'And milk?' yelled a voice.

'Obtain it from any cows or goats in all the natural leather objects you can find—handbags, gloves, pure hide attaché cases—anything made of animal skin. The animals' milk must be run directly into the containers.'

'So we've got to eat raw meat, huh?' demanded a truculent voice, revealed as a hulking ruffian in the middle distance. 'Say, professor, what do you take us for? Damned animals?'

Thurman compressed his lips bitterly.

'You can't make fire to cook it,' he snapped. 'Why do you ask such idiotic questions? You know by now that nothing that progresses can be touched or worked.'

'Fire can be produced, Doctor,' called a powerfully-built man on his left; then as Thurman stared at him in

surprise he came forward and vaulted lightly to the fountain. He turned to address the people.

'I grant that fire is impossible by ordinary methods,' boomed his strong voice. 'You have all probably used, or tried to, firewood—matches—and coal. Naturally nothing could be touched. All the same I've made a fire in my home.' He paused dramatically, breathing hard, conscious of the people hanging on his every word.

'I ran out of food recently, so I killed off one of my pigs using my bare hands. Half of the pig's fatty flesh I used for fuel, and some of the bones as well. A couple of the bones rubbed rapidly together produced enough friction in time to create fire and set the fat alight. Since it was flesh and blood it lit perfectly. Then I was able to cook the remaining half of the pig.' Thurman, who had been looking thoughtful, touched him on the arm, and made to speak himself.

'I've just thought of another method, going from what our friend here has been saying. However, it requires sunlight and won't be nearly so effective. The eye of a pig could act as a magnifying glass, and it's possible to focus the sun's rays on the pig, in sections. But the bone-rubbing idea is a good one, and should be tried.'

'I never thought of that,' the man remarked. Then, realising his moment had passed, and that he had nothing more useful to add, he jumped down into the crowd again and awaited Thurman's further instructions.

'So make fires!' Thurman shouted. 'For the moment there is nothing more that can be decided upon. I'll leave you to obtain the food as I've suggested, and then I'll help you arrange distribution later.'

Whether the people were satisfied or not could not altogether be determined. But Thurman reasoned that he had done all in his power to clear up the main problem—food and drink. The rest would have to come later. To reorganise Man's entire mode of living would take considerable time ...

'Guess you did your best, Doc,' Rodney murmured, watching the people slowly dispersing. 'Some of them will probably resent your self-appointed position as leader—but someone had to make the move.'

'You did remarkably well,' commented a strong voice. Turning in surprise, the trio beheld the inventor of the fire-making system beside them. His sharply chiselled intelligent face had a dry smile upon it. 'Joseph Mason is my name,' he volunteered. 'You may have heard of me.'

'Joseph Mason,' Thurman thought hard for a moment, then in some astonishment, 'Why, you're a scientific writer of sorts, aren't you?'

'Um—yes, of sorts. Ordinarily I breed animals, but geography has always been a hobby with me. I once wrote a book, *'Earth Through the Ages.'*'

'Yes—yes, I recall it now. You revealed a remarkable knowledge of the past.'

'Mainly a hobby with me. Unfortunately for me, my home was newly constructed, and now of course it is beginning to come to pieces. Perhaps I might join up

with you? I'd rather be with people of a sane, scientific outlook than amongst the masses.'

'You can join us with pleasure,' Thurman said sincerely. 'You're the sort of person I could do with—someone with ideas. Oh, excuse me—meet my daughter, Ann, and her husband Mr. Rodney Shenstone.'

Mason shook hands, then remarked: 'You know, Doctor, you certainly didn't think out this business at all well. You've burned your bridges behind you more effectively than any other man in history. When one thinks of what you've done—'

'What I've done, you mean?' Ann put in, her face colouring. 'This is all my fault, Mr. Mason.'

'A delusion she has, Mason,' Thurman intervened hastily. 'Come along to my home and we'll talk properly.' He led the way through the park entrance and across the road. They waited as a driverless car swept uncannily past, then continued their journey. Followed a wait of some thirty minutes before the front door opened, then the Doctor led the way into the lounge. The rays of the eastwardly setting sun were still slanting into the room.

'These doors are a damned nuisance, aren't they?' Mason asked casually, looking about him. 'I tried the expedient of putting my foot against the front door when it opened last time—but no! It shut just the same. My foot appeared to go through it, and yet oddly enough I was up against a solidity. Most paradoxical!'

'The whole business is mad—insane,' Rodney declared. 'I've been nursing a faint hope you might have some solution to the difficulty. Have you?'

Mason shook his head. 'I'm sorry—no. It is beyond the power of man to right this phenomenon, even though the ingenuity of Man—you, Doctor—has reversed Time. If only you could have foreseen what might happen.'

Thurman passed a weary hand over his forehead. 'There's something about all this that is utterly maddening—overpowering. I wonder I keep my sanity.'

'I did it!' Ann flared out suddenly. 'I was drunk, Mr. Mason—drunk with New Year wine. I interfered with Dad's apparatus—and then the thing was done in a flash. I can never forgive myself for that. My hand wrecked progress! I—one woman—flung thousands, millions to their deaths by my muddle-headed, crazy actions. Oh, I wish to God that I were dead!'

'Steady, Ann,' Rodney muttered, seizing her shoulder as she subsided into sobs.

'Yes, take it easy,' Mason advised, and his very calmness of tone had a steadying effect on the overwrought girl. 'No matter who did it, or how. It's happened; now we've got to face the results. It's surprising how Man can learn to fend for himself even when faced with this kind of thing.'

'The fire stunt, for instance?' Rodney asked.

'Exactly so—but there are also nights when one hasn't happened to be at home, and hence the lighting is off. I've been trying to think of a way to overcome it. Only thing I can think of would be to try and obtain a

considerable number of fish scales and use their luminescence.'

Thurman shook his head at Mason's suggestion. 'I think darkness would be preferable to that,' he said drily. 'If there's one thing I detest, it's the smell of fish! Besides, it won't do. We can't catch any fish—which is why I did not suggest them as a source of food earlier. Between us and the sea is that invisible wall of vibration. The fish are there, alright, but we can't get at them. Like flies in amber.' He fell silent, not wishing to dwell on the obvious.

'I've been thinking,' Rodney put in. 'Weren't you absent from your home for a day or so recently, Doctor?'

Thurman gave a slight start. 'Yes, I'd almost forgotten. I see what you mean,' he went on grimly. 'During that period the lights would be switched off, so we'll just have to sit in the dark.'

'So what?' Ann asked, then added bitterly: 'At least I won't be able to look at myself.'

'Why don't you and Ann fetch some of our food and milk supplies, Rod?' Thurman said, sensing that Ann was on the point of another outburst. Bring it over to the settee; it hasn't been moved in a while so we'll be safe enough on it. I hope you won't mind sour milk, Mason?'

'I thrive on it, Doctor.'

It was almost dark when Rodney and Ann reappeared, dimly visible carrying the remains of a turkey in their hands. Plates of course, were impossible, as the crockery couldn't be in two places at once. With every reverting second, Man was becoming surrounded by complicated, incredible circumstances.

Silently, Ann sat down, holding her own piece of turkey absently. Only when Rodney's arm stole round her waist did she start back into life; then she munched steadily, but listlessly.

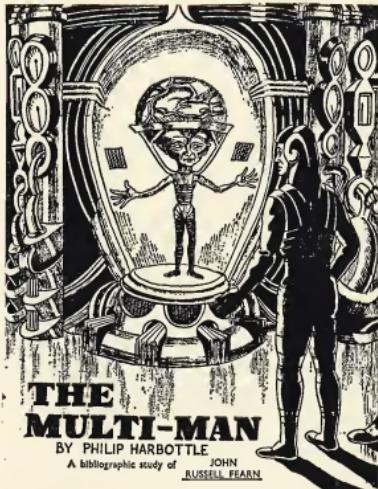
In the interval that followed, there were several half-hearted attempts to steer the conversation onto ordinary topics, but no one responded. The factor of Time reversal was the one overpowering thought on their minds. Finally Mason voiced his real thoughts.

'It's clear to me from my watch, and the shortening day and night periods, that this reversal is increasing with every passing hour. Finally we'll get four ordinary days in the space of twenty-four hours. Then faster still, until the sun will look something like a band of golden light. We shall live in a world of perpetual change. Lost in chaos . . .' He snapped the turkey bone between strong teeth.

'But, Mr. Mason, there is surely *some* answer?' Ann entreated. 'Although dad's so clever at thinking out these scientific miracles, he's just hopeless when it comes to undoing the messes he creates. Perhaps someone with more sense than he has—'

'Ann!'

'I mean it, father—and you know I'm right. Mr. Mason, are you sure that scientists somewhere won't be able to put things right?'



'If John Russell Fearn had been alive today, I am sure that he would be delighted with this epitaph and probably just as bewildered and surprised . . . I don't think that he ever realised just how much of a pioneer of science fiction he was: he wrote it because he liked the medium. I don't think he could ever be called a "great" writer of SF, from the literary standpoint, although many of his ideas were revolutionary, but he was one of the Greats of the earlier ages, and his name should be there with Hugo Gernsback, John W. Campbell, Stanley G. Weinbaum, Murray Leinster, and all the others whose thoughts and works formulated today's modern science fiction'.

JOHN CARNELL

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from the author at: 27 Cheshire Gardens,
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'Young lady, there is no way,' Mason replied steadily. 'It's like a poison without an antidote. Your father's experiment was so clever he defeated his own ends and everybody else.'

'So science admits defeat that easily!' Ann said disgustedly.

There was an uncomfortable silence, then presently Mason resumed.

'At the rate we shall shortly find Time moving, we might be able to view the world as it was before the coming of Man. In a way that will be interesting. Ultimately, thousands of years will hurtle past us in the space of a few hours. So, Earth's early days will catch up with us.'

'Then—then we shall finally come to the place where Earth is no longer in existence,' Rod remarked suddenly, a note of horror in his voice.

'Certainly,' Mason assented philosophically. 'We shall, I hope, see everything. The moon's return to Earth—if indeed it was ever part of this planet; the upheavals of the early days. Last of all will come Earth's return to the cosmic gases from which it sprang, though I doubt if we'll be here to view that!'

'I wonder if humanity at large realises what is to come?' Thurman muttered, and Mason laughed.

'Of course not!' he said cynically. 'Most people think the whole thing is going to blow over, whereas the very worst is not even in sight yet. Think what it means—the procession of Ages in reverse! Everything from the Quaternary Epoch to the Silurian Period! And then beyond that into the unguessable! I doubt if we'll survive.'

'I, for one, don't want to,' Ann said quietly.

'You say that now, but the very fascination of these changes will make death seem distasteful,' Mason said. 'Those that can survive will behold the most astounding things. Since we four have a fair knowledge of things between us, we may survive longer than the majority. Eh, Doctor?'

'It hardly bears thinking about,' Thurman grunted. 'I've had quite enough worry for one day. To be brief, I'm going to try and sleep. Are you two coming?' He rose to his feet and glanced at Rodney and Ann in the gloom.

'Later,' Rodney replied quietly. 'I want to talk to Ann for a while.'

'Just as you like. Come along, Mason—I'll show you to your room. But I accept no responsibility for what might happen in it! Goodnight you two.'

Low voices answered him. When they were alone, Rodney took his wife's hand, looking at her face in the faint starlight.

'Ann, I want you to promise me that you'll do nothing rash,' he said firmly. 'I mean that—Well, the way you've been talking, you seem convinced that you're the cause of all this. Thinking that, you might do something tragic.'

'Meaning?' Ann asked listlessly.

'You wouldn't be foolish enough to—to kill yourself, would you?' Rodney forced the words out with distaste. 'It has happened, you know, when people have got unstrung.'

'Kill myself?' The girl jolted upright, withdrew her hand from Rodney's grasp—then abruptly burst into peal upon peal of hysterical laughter.

'Ann! Stop it! Stop it!' Rodney clutched her shoulders and shook her violently. Presently Ann seemed to calm down a little. Her voice broke somewhat between weariness and emotional laughter as she spoke again.

'I can't kill myself! If I could, I would, Rodney. Yes, I would! The memory of my crime will remain for ever. But Heaven knows I'm being punished enough for it!'

'Ann—' Rodney was utterly at a loss.

'I can't seize a knife, I can't obtain a revolver, I can't drink poison. I can't even drown myself, because I can't displace the water or something stupid like that! It's the same for all of us; those who suffer. I long for self-

inflicted death to escape this world, but nothing can happen. I'm a woman who cannot die, unless . . . unless!' Hysteria gripped her again as Rodney held her shoulders. 'You!' she breathed hoarsely. 'You can do it for me, Rodney. You could strangle me, or—oh!' her words were snapped off as his hand slapped across her face.

'You're going to see it through! Don't talk like that!' Rodney shouted, sweat beading his brow. Ann collapsed against him, sobbing helplessly.

'Take it easy,' he whispered, his sense of outrage evaporating as he realised, fully and completely, the ordeal his wife was facing.

He took her in his arms, raising her bodily, and walked steadily towards the now open door of the room.

During the incredible days that followed, Man became increasingly aware of the true enormity of the thing that had come upon him. In many areas he reverted to bestial savagery, even cannibalism. But in New York, at least, some people followed out Doctor Thurman's suggestions, as a small body of men set to work killing off various animals by main strength. Fires, too, were provided by means of the method Mason had discovered.

Aided by Mason, Thurman himself supervised the food distribution in the main city abattoirs.

It was a gigantic task. Milk, too, was duly obtained in many weird and varied vessels. So, for a time at least, the seething queues of people were supplied with food and drink.

A strange and motley array of people they proved to be. Arriving ceaselessly, and occasionally exploding into violence—immediately choked off by gangs of dedicated attendants—some dressed in clothes that were remarkably new; yet the men were unshaven and the women grimy. A few of the more fastidious people used some of the milk for washing purposes, others grease. The vast majority went filthy and unwashed.

For six days this system of feeding and drinking persisted—then the blow fell, relentlessly and completely. Not surprisingly it was the imperturbable Mason who made the discovery.

'Doc, the game's up,' he announced to his three soiled and troubled colleagues, in Thurman's home. 'I've been out making a few investigations on my own account, and I've discovered something we'd overlooked. Cattle are dying everywhere, rapidly, because there is no natural food or water. None of the animals can eat grass or drink water!'

'Can't we feed them on the meat of other cattle?' Rodney demanded.

'Useless to try. For one thing no cow will eat cow, nor horse horse. For another it's the wrong food entirely.'

'So the source of nourishment has dried up,' Thurman said sombrely. 'Well, we've got to look out for ourselves now; leave the people to do what they can. Nothing else for it.'

'We've got to get out before the people realise what's wrong,' Mason had evidently been thinking ahead. 'They'll lynch us when they find out what's happened.' He broke off, regarding Thurman and Rodney each in turn. 'You two look different somehow,' he remarked, frowning. Then he shrugged. 'Come on—we'll collect what food we've got, our milk gourds, and then get out.'

'Where to?' Ann asked.

'Anywhere! We'll worry about that when we're safe from the people in the vicinity. Come on.'

He strode in the direction of the larder, which was open, and seized two heavy milk gourds. He slung them over his shoulder by the tough cow-gut thong that joined them. Silently the others collected up what remains of food they could find, and turned to leave.

'These are going to be an infernal weight to lug around,' Mason muttered, heaving at the milk-gourds. 'I wonder if there's a better way...' he rubbed his jaw absently, then gave a yelp. To the astonishment of the others he began to pat his face rapidly, a wild light in his eyes.

'What's the matter?' Thurman demanded.

Mason dropped the milk-gourds heavily to the vibration-level that passed for the floor. He looked considerably shaken.

'Now I know why you two looked different! Your beards have gone!'

Blankly, the two men fingered their jaws.

'I noticed mine had gone when I stroked my chin just now,' Mason went on. 'I've been trying to place the difference in you two for some time. Funny how long it took to spot it. We're all of us without beards!'

'But how could that be, if you haven't shaved?' Ann asked in bewilderment.

'It's obvious now,' Thurman said grimly. 'I knew all along that my machine's vibrations would finally affect living organisms as well. This is the beginning! We're going backwards, too—much slower than the giant reversal around us, because we're organic. Our beards have grown backwards, as it were, and all we'll get in future will be the small sproutings corresponding to those prior to shaving—and they'll vanish pretty rapidly. One thing is obvious, though. We need no food and no water. A state of backward growth requires no nourishment; metabolism has ceased. No tissue wastage! We probably won't sleep either, since sleep is caused chiefly by tissue-waste products in the blood—and now there is none.'

'Now that we're growing younger, will we repeat all our bodily troubles?' Rodney asked. 'I once broke an ankle, years ago, at a sports meeting.'

'I don't think so. The external Time conditions don't correspond with the conditions we experienced in past life. We shouldn't repeat illnesses, injuries, or such like, because external Time is moving so fast compared to us. We can never catch up with the conditions that caused those things. We'll simply grow younger constantly...'

'Which means we're free to do anything we want, go where we want, see what we want—so long as our

bodies remain.' Mason was seemingly elated at the weird prospect facing them.

'Of course,' Thurman agreed. 'We can't even be injured, so far as I can see—otherwise those injuries would already be recorded. You could say we're eternal—backwards!'

'A living tomb,' Ann muttered. 'We cannot die meanwhile, yet in the end we must do, because we'll be too young to live!'

'A merciful finish,' said Mason, now looking thoughtfully.

'Well, let's get out. Nothing stopping us is there?' Rodney asked.

Followed the customary waiting period, then when the door ultimately did open, the four crossed the threshold into the street. It took a good deal of will on the part of Thurman in particular to leave the place for the last time. He had spent all of his married life in the house, including also the last seven years following the death of his wife.

'Which way?' Rodney asked, glancing about him.

'It doesn't really signify, so long as we move away from the docks area—Hallo! This looks ugly!' Mason broke off.

Round the corner of the avenue there had suddenly appeared a motley collection of determined civilians. They had borne down on Thurman and his party before they could make the effort to run for it. Grimy hands reached out and seized them.

'You, Thurman, are the one we want!' snarled the self-appointed leader of the mob. 'You knew our food and drink would fail! Now you're trying to escape, leaving us to starve: get that stuff off them!' he snapped, and the four found their food and drink supply snatched from them.

'Listen to reason, man!' Thurman panted, trying to pull himself loose. 'If you'll only try to—'

'Aw, can the excuses! How are we going to live? That's all that interests us!'

The crowd grew visibly with the seconds, and Thurman looked about him uneasily. There was no telling how a vicious public, facing starvation and believing they had been duped, might react.

'Leave go of my wife,' can't you?' Rodney shouted, as several hulking specimens pulled at her struggling form. Fears of mutilation and rape snapped through his racing brain. Abruptly he stamped down onto the foot of the ruffian who was pinioning his arms. His foot seemed to pass clean through the man. Startled, he relaxed his grip. Instantly Rodney lashed out at the roughneck clutching his wife. The man was sent reeling but did not appear hurt. A moment later Rodney went down under the weight of several bodies.

'That settles it!' their leader snapped. 'We get rid of 'em—now!'

'Throw 'em in the seal' somebody yelled.

'The sea! The seal' reiterated countless hoarse voices.

'Can't you fools realise anything?' Mason panted,

struggling desperately. 'Don't you know you're getting younger—?'

'Hear that?' bawled a derisive voice. 'We're getting younger! If that isn't a laugh I don't know what is!'

'We're sick of explanations, buddy, and we mean to have action,' said the leader grimly. 'Guess we'll get on better without you four creeps for a start. Okay, boys, lift 'em up!'

The four were instantly seized with eager hands, lifted aloft, and carried in triumph through the mob-lined streets. They were swept along towards the main docks about the city's harbour. Presently the quartet were flung down at the edge of a high landing stage. From below came the curiously revolting sound of waves lapping in reverse.

'You've asked for this!' growled the leader thickly. 'You've been the cause of all our troubles, and now you're going to pay.' He swung round on his comrades. 'In with 'em!' he bawled harshly. 'It'll be dark in a moment or two. Hurry it up!'

'What if they swim ashore?' said one of the burly figures.

'Aw, use your brains. The tides are always haywire these days and will sweep 'em out. Besides, we'll soon finish them if they try and get out. These walls are sheer anyhow. Okay, throw 'em in!'

'Wait—' began Thurman desperately, but that was as far as he got. The next moment he was knocked into space by a violent push. Likewise Ann, Rodney and Mason. They were completely helpless against the mob, and plummeted down into the gloomy abyss of the dock.

Those above them stood listening intently, but no sound of a splash reached them. Anxiously they peered into the murk—then came a discontented voice.

'What's the use of standing here in the dark? They've gone all right. Let's get back to the city and try and find some more food and drink. The stuff those rats had won't do for more than a few of us.'

'Yeah. Maybe you're right,' the leader was strangely hesitant. 'Funny thing; I don't feel either hungry or thirsty . . . We'll get back, all the same.'

And he strode forward purposefully, leading his filthy band back towards the unfamiliar, slowly vanishing skyline of New York.

Four figures rose up very slowly and perplexedly in the darkness at the bottom of the dock wall. Beneath their feet was complete solidity. Yet, faintly visible, apparently passing through their legs and clothes without leaving any impression, were the waves of the sea. For several moments they had been too frightened to move, which fact had probably saved them from further mob action. Thurman gave a quiet chuckle. 'Of course!' he exclaimed. 'We can't enter water because we'd be displacing it in a time where it hasn't formerly been displaced. It's the same effect here as on land; everything is separated by vibration. Literally, we are walking on water . . . H'mm, wonder if that had anything to do with Biblical miracles?'

'But we're not even hurt after our fall down here!' Ann was dazed by events, if not by her fall.

'Of course not,' Mason answered her. 'Since we are growing younger with every second we can't be damaged by anything—otherwise we'd contravene Time. We remain sound in body because that's how we were back at this moment in Time.'

'This possibility of walking unharmed on the sea, and being unable to be injured in any way, opens up boundless possibilities,' Thurman remarked, after an interval. 'If we go back to the city, we'd be set upon again by the mob. And even though we couldn't be killed, the experience is unlikely to be pleasant. Personally, therefore, I propose going to Europe.'

'Europe!' Rodney echoed blankly. 'You mean walk two thousand miles across the ocean?'

'Why not? We've got the rest of our backward lives to do it in, and nothing can stop us. Besides, some of the greatest geological events took place in Europe. Lots of things there might be worth seeing, eh Mason?'

'It's a great idea, Doc!' Mason agreed. 'We'll do it. Apart from anything else, we're not likely to be troubled much by any wandering mobs out here on the ocean. Okay with you two?'

Rodney shrugged and took Ann's arm. 'Lead the way.'

'Moon's rising,' remarked Ann, pointing to the west. 'It'll light the way.'

So began perhaps the most amazing journey ever made by mortal creatures. Walking on the surface of the waves, untroubled by the ebbing rollers that passed through them as they went. Four mortals whose clothes still changed periodically no matter how far they travelled from their home; clothes that became slowly newer. And even the mind of Thurman was yet to grasp the full enormity of the incredible events . . .

As the days slid by into weeks, and weeks into months, the full effects of the Time reversal became manifest. Within two months—by the old reckoning—of the coming of the reversal there was no recognised night and day. Only an utterly confusing rapidly accelerating backward sweep through the ages.

The sun appeared now as a golden ball, hurtling west-to-east, to be followed by the violently phasing moon in reverse. The whole heavens were darkly purple—a mass of criss-crossing hazes of light. And even some of the nearer stars seemed to eddy and shift position.

New York itself had dwindled to zero, as had a great many other cities and towns. Everything began to recede from the face of the Earth as Man's handiwork disappeared into the sealed vault that was future time. Man watched and wondered, dazed and bewildered. He had found by now that he was growing younger, no longer needed nourishment or sleep. This knowledge scarcely eased the minds of the masses. However, no-one suffered from insanity or mental breakdowns, simply because they never *had* done so.

Vegetation, growing in reverse, began to appear as



• EDDIE JONES •

an *untouchable* mass of spewing, spreading and receding green. Gradually it overtook and covered over the vast, open rocky spaces where once proud cities had reared up. Mountains rose—and fell. At times humans would find themselves plunged to enormous depths or raised to stupendous heights by shiftings of the ground on which they stood—only somehow they avoided injury.

So the change went on, the world over, at an ever increasing speed. And out on the swirling bosom of the Atlantic, four human beings continued their march towards Europe. All of them were now some three years younger than when they had started. They were naked. Owing to the lapse of external Time, their clothes had long since failed them. Rodney, in a brief and abortive attempt to save his wife's modesty, had made attempts to utilise the skins of the countless fish they encountered. But the fish were just *in* the water to keep them alive, just as human beings could still breathe the atmosphere around them, and were separated from actual contact by the vibration above the water. But before long, so utterly had normal standards of civilization and modesty been shattered, they adapted to their condition. Indeed they wondered as they progressed why Man had ever bothered with clothes at all.

As the trek continued, it became evident that the Atlantic was rapidly receding, as they encountered a profusion of bone-dry islands. Ultimately, upon a vast and lonely island in the midst of the all-pervading yellowish glow of the streaking sun, they beheld an incredible sight.

Surrounded by the thundering breakers of the *untouchable* ocean stood a city of dreams, dry and majestic. Mighty pyramids and slender towers stood side by side in a system of architecture and structural brilliance such as had never been seen by any of the quartet. It looked at once incredibly ancient but somehow ultra-modern, like a city of the future might have looked.

'What is it?' breathed Mason. 'Anything you know, Thurman?'

'It must be Atlantis!' Thurman cried. 'It was supposed to exist somewhere off Northern Europe, wasn't it? Just look at those pillars—those edifices! And yet, no people ...'

'Nothing that has died becomes visible.'

For perhaps half an hour of ordinary time, the four stood staring at the apparition from Time—a half hour in which centuries streaked backwards. Then, piece by piece, the city visibly crumbled, diminished—a reverse action of it being built by hands no longer apparent. At last it became entirely ghostlike, merged into the mists of the unknown, and was gone. The island upon which it had stood grew visibly then, rose up steadily, and spread out dry feelers through the receding ocean. Presently the four watchers realised they were on dry ground.

'Which shows geological theories to be correct,' commented Mason. 'Northern Europe *did* extend far out

into the modern Atlantic Ocean. North-Western Europe, to be exact . . . Well, Thurman, we're here. Satisfied?'

'More than satisfied,' the scientist answered quietly. 'We may behold many things now that we are here. Let's be moving on.'

So the advance continued. Ever and again they came across drifting tribes of naked men and women, wandering along the hardened and solidified plains of this remotely early land. Here they detoured, having elected to keep rigidly to themselves. In many ways it was an unpleasant land, frozen in many parts later on, concurring, according to Mason, with the arrival of the Glacial Period. Soon they would actually arrive at the period of the Earth before Man himself had come to be.

'How can that be?' Rodney asked, when Mason made the point. 'We can't reach that early on, otherwise we'd be confounding our own birthright.'

'I thought you understood by now that we move thousands of times slower than external Time,' Mason responded. 'We're growing younger, but at this rate Earth will be nearly back to cosmic dust before we ourselves become extinct.'

'Where do we go now?' Ann asked. As Mason had predicted, she was alertly interested in the things around her. Her crushing self guilt was hardly evident. 'Funny how we're nearly standing on ice and yet feel no cold, isn't it?'

'That's because everything about us, although real enough in itself, is just like a vivid dream would be to us.' Thurman returned slowly. His gaze swept the friendless grey level plain before him. 'We'll go across the plain ahead of us, and see where it brings us.'

For many normal weeks they wandered haphazardly, going wherever the mood took them. Everywhere about them was perpetual backward change. Finally they arrived in a region that had once been a mountain range in Norway. From a high elevation they beheld something which astounded them, impressing Mason particularly.

The valley below them, through which they had come, had been filled to the topmost foothills with ice-packed water. Yet now, as they watched, the whole vast sea of ice and mud was boiling strangely. The curious condition persisted and became even more agitated as the time reversal progressed. Then, in one thundering, boiling mass the whole sea began to drop, leaving dry land below it. The waters surged and battered their way through a stupendous chasm in the far end of the mountain range, carrying back boulders of ice and snow in their grip. Finally there was left a peaceful, deserted valley, dry as a board. No trace of a cleft remained in the mountain range which had resealed itself.

'What on earth happened?' demanded Rodney at last, and Mason smiled faintly in the yellow light.

'That was the North European deluge in reverse,' he answered. 'I wondered if something like this wouldn't happen as we crossed the vast mass of water that existed in the valley down there. It didn't strike me as

a natural place for an inland sea at the time.'

'Do you mean it was *the* Deluge, that was in the Bible?' Ann enquired excitedly.

Mason smiled. 'No; just one of several deluges that swept the Earth in early times. The Biblical Deluge came long after Man had arrived; this age is before Man. We missed that, being in the wrong part of the world. What did you make of it, Thurman?'

'Very queer, especially as it has left bone dry land behind. Of course it was bound to do so, because now we see the land before the deluge came.'

After an interval, they continued over the mountain range. On and on they travelled, for no other reason than to see where it might bring them.

As the backward flight became even more rapid, so the change in human organisms increased its pace. As a result all Mankind was becoming visibly younger.

By the time Thurman's party had crossed the range to the pre-deluge plain beyond, they were quite six years younger than at their departure from New York. Ann had receded into a slim, girlish creature; Rodney into a young man of immature appearance. Mason had lost considerable bulk. Thurman, too, had lost his stoop of incipient age. He walked now with a springy step and much more erect carriage.

Their wanderings brought them to the Europe of the Quaternary Epoch. They no longer beheld flat plains, but varied mountain ranges, and not a little vegetation. Forests came and went with succeeding ice ages. Such hardy trees as oaks and willows were in evidence, passing from full growth into saplings, then entirely disappearing. Then silent and untouchable, the Epoch slid into scenes of the Pliocene Period, and a more temperate zone. The land was remarkably green and restful for a space. Rivers flowed backwards in the shifting landscape. They passed safely through a tremendous upheaval which Mason imagined to be the formation of the North Sea itself. Here and there were vast lakes and inland seas, many of which would remain in modified form in time to come—if indeed the future could still be regarded as such.

In the main, they had noticed, the skies had been clear. True, clouds had transiently arrived, but they were gone in a flash, even though they might have persisted in actuality for a decade. For the most part the deeply purple heavens remained unmarred; and, on the changing Earth below, the Miocene and Eocene Periods came and went, to give way to the crueler looking stretches of the Cretaceous Period. The landscape had changed enormously; the ever-ebbing sea had come inwards and washed now against swampy coastal plains, forming enormous deltas.

By the time Ann had regressed to fifteen and Rodney eighteen they had all four come to the swampy, forest-infested era classed as the Jurassic Period. Here, on one occasion, whilst wandering along a lonely shore, they had a singular experience, which forced home to them how utterly apart from the world around them they were.

They stood silent and transfixed. Not twenty yards away, in the swampy soil of the shore, were the footprints of some colossal, prehistoric beast. The creature itself was invisible, but its mighty imprints in the soil were quite evident—moving backwards! One after another along the shore the prints snapped into extinction, revealing where the monster was walking. After a time a group of battered trees in the foreground suddenly resumed their normal foliage, proving beyond doubt the backward passage of the creature...

The Triassic Period passed with extreme rapidity, more than thirty millions of years telescoped into months. Then a change came on the face of the world. The streaking sun and much-nearer moon became hidden by a colossal preponderance of clouds. And now an element of terror entered the minds of the youthful people at the sights they beheld—the first glimpses of a young world struggling for the existence it had gained and lost.

Storms, terrifying and overwhelming, proved the arrival of the Permian Period, the Period of clouds, upheavals and convulsions. Though these storms were always reversed they lost none of their potency. Lightning stabbed backwards, revealing the tortured landscape in an unholy glare, for miles around. A landscape of boiling, steaming lakes and writhing, lashing trees. A mighty warping of the earth's crust resulted in entire cliffs rearing up in the tempests from soil mounds and rock piles—actually they must have been cliff-collapses of violent and terrible force.

The lakes steamed and hissed with the lightning flashes; the skies darkened to pitch blackness. From out of the ebon vault, starting with the distant growl at the end of the thunder, and then rising up to the original awe-inspiring din, cannonaded the thunderclap itself.

Time and again the hapless four were pitched headlong from their various vantage points. Yet always they survived, to gaze again upon the horrors and destructions of a dangerously young planet... Then, as suddenly as they came, the upheavals passed. In the eerie stillness, the streaking sun and near moon reappeared.

Backwards and backwards, through all the vicissitudes of hurtling ages, until there appeared the vividly green Carboniferous Age. Overwhelmingly excessive vegetation, festering swamps, and foetid lagoons. The accumulation of rotted vegetation was everywhere around them, vegetation that would become peat, and then through accumulating pressures and chemical change, hard black coal. Coal for the future that had already been destroyed. Paradoxes—infinite and complete...

The Carboniferous Age spun out at bewildering speed, then the luxurious rampancy of growth gave way into the gaunt Devonian Period from which it had originally sprung. Volcanic activity was again in evidence, elevating mountain ranges from the sea—but always in that strange, maddening reverse action. The Earth was becoming very, very young.

In the midst of the changing heavens the sun had

become slightly whiter in tint, indicative of increased heat. The moon had changed to a massive silver ball circling ever nearer the Earth. And somewhere four human creatures—Ann, the youngest, now only six years old, and Doctor Thurman, the eldest, now thirty-eight—watched these things and pondered what it all meant. Ann was unaware of the merciful release backward growth had given her; her mind no longer understood how terrible and catastrophic had been the history of time-reversal.

The last understandable Age of the world marched with relentless speed into the hard, primitive plains of the Devonian Period.

The Silurian Period, with its main feature of towering, gigantic rocks, was an inimical outlook. The four travelers floundered onwards, gazing up at towering, colossal cliffs of sheer rock, grey and transiently impregnable against the sky. They paused, standing on the lonely plateau to which they had come, looking out upon a scummy, slowly stirring ocean, lined along its shore with the omnipresent needle-pointed crags and buttresses . . . slimy, primeval vegetation sprouted along the shores.

Then—the Near-Beginning, the Cambrian Period.

Came the earliest era, the Pre-Cambrian for lack of a better name, when Earth first began to form; when it was but a primitive globe.

The skies darkened once more, and then rose up, from the midst of indescribable chaos, the most gigantic transformations. Land rose and fell visibly; deluges poured from the condensing steam of the heated lakes; clouds bulged and exploded into masses of lightning and flame, emptying their searing contents of flood and cloudburst upon a drenched and tortured world below. All in reverse, yes, but so insensate and appalling in its fury that everything merged into one common hell of destruction and formation.

The four stood with difficulty in the midst of the terrifying light and flame, hidden from each other by steam at times—steam they were mercifully unable to touch. Ann screamed, lost in the darkness; then her small hand came into contact with Rodney. She gripped his arm convulsively.

'The Beginning!' breathed Thurman, staring through the clouds of smoke. 'See! We are going ever nearer to the Beginning!"

He spoke too soon. It was still a long way from the Beginning.

Through inestimable time, the four floundered together through a world of violently changing landscapes, crawled up rocks they could not grip, dropped into chasms of smoke and flame that did not scorch them; stood unprotected beneath the vomiting heavens.

Backwards and backwards—faster and faster. The heavens changed colour, and Thurman saw that the moon had gone! It had returned to the molten Earth!

Then Thurman and Mason found themselves suddenly alone. Ann and Rodney had gone. Grief-stricken, Thurman reeled in confusion.

'Are they lost?' he yelled into the chaos.

'No,' Mason whispered. 'I saw what happened. It seemed for a brief instant that they had both become babies. They collapsed onto the ground, and tried to crawl towards me. Then they became huddled, lying inert. Then—they vanished!'

'Vanished!' Thurman repeated dully. 'You mean they have returned to nothing? Gone to whence they started?' He sat down heavily, frozen horror on his face, then suddenly he started as Mason grabbed his shoulder.

'Come on! We've got to go forward.' He linked his arm in Thurman's, and together they went on.

As though it were running suddenly downhill in Time, Earth swooped with dizzying speed through the last cycles of its Time-existence . . .

Remaining solids changed to boiling lava; the lava to literal rivers of flame and ruin, in which mountains and hills and plains dissolved miraculously—the creations, viewed normally, of the lava itself.

Reverse! Reverse! Everything was in reverse! This knowledge alone dinned through Thurman's brain as he carried onwards.

Who was this young screaming baby who crawled painfully beside him? What was he doing like this, suddenly unable to walk? He turned, suddenly unable to remember how to speak, and tried to grip Mason's hand. He stopped midway in movement, too stunned to complete the action.

Mason was sitting still, an amazing expression on his baby-face. Then his body became visibly smaller and smaller. His face shrank into a little wrinkled mass. The eyes disappeared; the whole body collapsed like a deflated bladder.

The space was empty. Joseph Mason had returned to the unknown state existing before Life.

Thurman twisted about in dumb confusion. Where was he? What was he? What was this boiling red chaos about him? This mad sense of gyrating motion? This strange and murky sky surging with bars of flaming mist?

Seemingly a nebula whirled between the flaming intermittences. Everything seemed to be on fire. Thurman's body was warping and shrinking.

There was no air! He couldn't breathe. He could not think. Something was reaching out to seize him—something blank, dark and utterly incomprehensible. It struck him, absorbed his whole being.

The endless reaches of Eternity yawned suddenly stupendous before him . . .

The whirling globe of interstellar gas from which Earth and her eight sister planets had been born decreased in size. It became a brilliant speck in the intensity of space, a brilliant speck of cosmic dust.

Time has no end—Eternity has no beginning. The two are inseparable. Hence the dust that had once been Earth was *still* going backwards . . . Into the Unknown, the Inconceivable—the Limitless!

The Impatient Dreamers

WALTER GILLINGS

7. Something Old, Something New

In the attic where I store the accumulations of forty years of editorial activity, in and out of the science fiction field, is a pile of large envelopes a good eighteen inches high, stuffed with what magazine writers call 'tearsheets'—printed pages of stories they have contributed to one publication or another.

Each of those bulky envelopes bears a name... suggesting, now in many cases, of a memorial plaque, though several fortunately are still with us. Taken altogether, they represent to a large degree *Who Was Who* in American sf in the decade before the war. Dr. David H. Keller, Hart Vincent, Edmond Hamilton, Neil R. Jones, Stanton A. Coblenz, Murray Leinster, R. F. Starzl, A. Hyatt Verrill, Dr. Miles J. Breuer, Ralph Milne Farley, Francis Flagg, Major S. P. Meek, Lloyd Arthur Eshbach, Ed Earl Repp, Walter Katelyn, Charles Willard Diffin, Leslie F. Stone, Jack Williamson, Otis Adelbert Kline, Isaac R. Nathanson, Clark Ashton Smith, Richard Tooker, Thomas S. Gardner...

Those readers who remember Britain's pioneer science fiction magazine, *Tales of Wonder* (and if they still possess all sixteen issues they have quite a valuable property), will recall at least some of these names with nostalgic pleasure. Those of a younger generation should recognise at least three of them—veteran Murray Leinster (Will Fitzgerald Jenkins), Edmond Hamilton and Jack Williamson, all of whom, it would appear, have yet to write *finis* to their immense contributions to the field.

If they are not as actively creative, both Leinster and Williamson are busily engaged in conveying to writing students at two different universities the benefit of their vast experience. Of the rest, at least nine I know to have written their last chapter, while the others have vanished from the scene—excepting Neil R. Jones, who dropped in on me while vacationing in England a few

Readers on both sides of the Atlantic are finding this series, relating the story of how British science fiction developed as a specialised form, of absorbing interest. In this article the veteran ex-editor of *Tales of Wonder* recalls how leading American authors helped it to carry the banner as the first regular magazine until it was halted by the war, which also scuttled Fantasy after only three issues.

years back, when it transpired that his wife's relatives live only a few miles away from me.

A regular contributor to *Weird Tales* before the advent of *Amazing*, Edmond Hamilton was the second American writer I introduced into *Tales of Wonder*, and the first to 'cop a cover'. The third (Summer 1938) issue featured 'The Horror in the Telescope', a short story which proved the only acceptable offering in a pile of original manuscripts that came my way after having gone the rounds of the American magazines without finding a billet. They had also been considered—and rejected, I suspect, even more firmly—by the editor in charge of the abandoned Newnes project, of which we had not heard the last.

The rest of these sorry specimens—the best that New York agent Julius Schwartz could offer, by way of John Russell Fearn—convinced me that I must look to the handful of British writers to supply such new material as I could wheedle out of them after they had tried to win from the American market much better rewards than I could offer them. Though there were a few who, out of sheer enthusiasm for our cause, gave me first option on their work, and even tailored their stories specifically to the requirements I laid down in a Memorandum which left them ample scope without hampering them with needless taboos. But I did insist that

...new ideas and 'thought variant' plots such as are required by the leading American magazines are not necessary... On the contrary, it is the more simple straightforward theme that is required (however 'hackneyed' it might be for America), in order that the story shall be acceptable to a reading public unused to the many fantastic notions that have been developed by American science fiction in the course of eleven years. In this country, the develop-



Leading lights of American sf pictured at a New York get-together in 1937. Front row (left to right): Authors Otto Binder and Manly Wade Wellman; agent Julius Schwartz. Back row: Authors Jack Williamson, L. Sprague de Camp, Dr. John D. Clark, Frank B. Long; editor Mort Weisinger; author Edmond Hamilton; author/agent Otis A. Kline.

ment of the science-fantasy medium is only just beginning, and although a large proportion of its readers are those who have become familiar with its more advanced forms . . ., *Tales of Wonder* will have to start at the beginning and go all over the old ground again if it is to capture the interest of a public big enough to enable it to survive.

... whatever the theme, the treatment should be such as to make the ingredients of the story assimilable by the uninitiated reader . . . At the same time, new 'slants' on old themes will be welcomed, since the widely-read, critical sf fan has also to be catered for and will demand at least a certain amount of originality . . .

One or two authors—or fans who aspired to authorship—fondly imagining they were going to get a British equivalent to *Astounding Stories*, and mistaking my caution for timidity, disagreed with this well-considered policy as encouraging 'milk-and-water' science fiction. But when the first issue appeared—and what a kick it gave me to see it on the news-stands!—it received almost universal approval from both writers and fans. Many found what I considered, on reflection, its staid interior make-up (largely dictated by the economic limitations imposed from the start) a refreshing change from the blatant approach of the U.S. magazines; especially the new *Thrilling Wonder*, which even ran a crude strip cartoon—until it was howled out by the outraged fans.

In 1937 there was little indication that *Wonder*, with its sister *Startling*, was going to give *Astounding* a run for its money, both as regards quantity and quality of

its literary content. As for *Amazing*, it was dying from sheer inanition when, the following year, it was taken over by Ziff-Davis of Chicago and jazzed up in comic-book style by Editor Raymond A. Palmer, who in due course set in train the flying saucer myth.

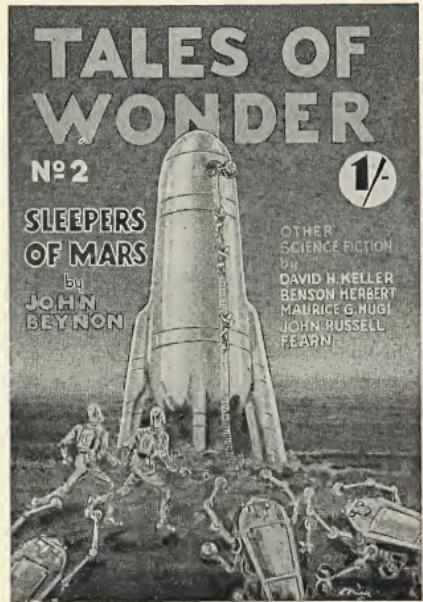
In spite of—or was it in consequence of?—these transatlantic distractions, reactions to the first issue of *Tales of Wonder* convinced publisher Chalmers Roberts that sf had a following in this country big enough—or keen enough—for *The World's Work* to cater for. Though to him, as he frankly confessed, a shilling magazine was something casually picked off a railway station bookstall to while away a long journey, I believe that even he was impressed by the letters which came in from enthusiastic fans, of which I made the most in *Scientifiction, The British Fantasy Review*. Anyway, he did not wait for returns to give a complete picture of the response to the 'one-shot' before he decided, on six months' showing, to go ahead with a second issue and publish the title regularly on a quarterly basis.

I think England was all too slow in getting its own science fiction magazine. I believe that our two magazines can co-operate in expanding the field . . . in England and on the Continent . . . So wrote John W. Campbell, new editor of *Astounding*, who was to set new standards for sf and break all records for editorial longevity in the field. I did not meet him, either, until the 1965 London Convention, when I was hardly surprised to see him surrounded by a group of admiring fans squatting reverentially at his feet. But it was a sight I shall never forget . . .

And so *Tales of Wonder* hit the bullseye—or came close enough to it to qualify in the contest. But we soon began to run short of ammunition, at least of the right calibre. Considering how profitable his 'Stowaway to Mars' had been—it was serialised twice by Odhams, in *Passing Show* and *Modern Wonder*, and published by Newnes in book form—I felt that John Beynon was doing me (or, rather, *Tales of Wonder*) a charitable act when he gave me the chance to print the sequel in the second issue. Relating the adventures of the Russian spaceship's crew, marooned on the dying Red Planet, 'Sleepers of Mars' was admirable material for the magazine, and for the cover by 'Nick'—John Nicholson, to give him his proper name.

Fearn was present, naturally, with a comparatively simple tale of a journey 'Through Earth's Core', for which he adopted a lighter touch than usual. There again, too, was Maurice G. Hugi, with a tale about a man with 'Super-Senses.' Benson Herbert, who had been squeezed out of the first issue, contributed 'Invaders from Venus.' And William F. Temple, who with Arthur C. Clarke had perpetrated *Amateur Science Stories*, made his professional debut with 'Lunar Lilliput', in which he looked forward to the British Interplanetary Society financing the first trip to the Moon.

It was Temple—personification of the struggling author, lifelong disciple of Wells and keen student of the cinema—who contributed to the fourth (Autumn



Cover of Tales of Wonder's second issue, illustrating the sequel to John Beynon's 'Stowaway to Mars.'

1938) issue a story that probably did more than anything I could have done to establish *Tales of Wonder's* reputation in the field, while putting him in the forefront of Britain's small group of sf writers. Let me admit that it was with some misgiving that I published 'The Smile of the Sphinx', after a great deal of persuasion and some revision by the author. It seemed to me that the notion of the cat having its origin on the Moon was one which the uninitiated reader I constantly had in mind would only find laughable, however adroitly it was handled. But the unstinted praise the tale received from the fans fully justified the author's confidence, and made me resolve never again to shy away from what at first might seem an outrageously novel idea.

It was not the first time an editor had erred on the side of caution, and I was thankful I had let myself be swayed by Temple's protestations—and his skill as a writer, which I had not been slow to recognise. There was little danger of my repeating the error, however. Such new material as I was able to accept at that stage raised no problems on the score of originality. Among the new writers the magazine introduced was Charles F. Hall, who contributed a couple of tales which might almost have been written by Wells; Frank Edward Arnold, one-time chairman of the Science Fiction Association's London branch, and now kingpin of the Lon-

don Circle; and Leslie J. Johnson, first secretary of the British Interplanetary Society. Liverpool also gave us H. O. Dickinson, who had made his bow in *Wonder Stories* before it changed hands, and Leslie V. Heald, who wrote as Charnock Walsby and helped to produce *Science-Fantasy Review*, journal of the local branch of the S.F.A.

But none of these writers, for one reason or another, succeeded in following up his initial advantage; while death cut short the career of D. J. Foster, a young newcomer who showed great promise. By the fifth (Winter 1938) issue, Arthur C. Clarke had launched himself towards the zenith with an article on 'Man's Empire of Tomorrow' in which he anticipated exploration of the solar system within 'the next few generations': he wisely steered clear of dates! His attempts at fiction, however, were at that time impeded by his passion for poetry and, I suspect, the influence of Olaf Stapledon which compelled him to see everything on a cosmic scale.

I. O. Evans, author of that unique volume *The World of Tomorrow* (1933), and instigator of a series of cigarette cards with the same title (he was well-known as a cartophilist), also contributed articles on space-flight and time-travel. Once he had discovered the opening, veteran author George C. Wallis, a Sheffield cinema manager who had written for *Weird Tales* and *Amazing Stories*, and even for *Lot-o'-Fun*, kept up a steady flow of manuscripts in beautiful longhand, most of which were used. But who could have suspected that the tales of Australian Coutts Brisbane (real name R. Coutts Armour) had originally appeared in the *Red and Yellow Magazines* as long ago as 1913?

Inclusion of Dr. David H. Keller's extraordinary tale of ten years before, 'Stenographer's Hands', in the second issue of the new magazine was part of a deliberate design to reprint at least one American piece each time; preferably a story with an original idea, an essentially simple plot, and some genuine human interest. This, I felt, would serve as a 'pointer' to our own writers besides giving new readers an indication of the scope of science fiction, in human rather than mechanistic terms. Keller's tales, like 'The Eternal Professors', were just what the doctor ordered. Only the fact that it was so clumsily written prevented me using his first and most famous tale, 'The Revolt of the Pedestrians'—which, as far as I am concerned, is now long overdue.

As we progressed, and I had to rely on far more reprint material than I ever intended—or even thought possible—the tendency was towards stories which, though more imaginative in theme, were none the less simple in essence and had a strong human appeal. Such, for instance, as Leinster's 'The Mad Planet'—providing an excellent cover by artist W. J. Roberts—first published in *Argosy* just fifty years ago. Or 'The Planet of Youth' by Stanton A. Coblenz, whose satirical tales, though pessimistic in tone, were apposite at the time and had distinct literary merit.

Perhaps most appealing of all to the reader we wanted to capture were the fantasies of Clark Ashton Smith;



Tales of Wonder cover by artist W. J. Roberts, depicting a scene from 'City of Singing Flame,' by Clark Ashton Smith.

especially 'The City of Singing Flame', which I presented with its sequel as a single story. Though his style was peculiarly his own and his penchant for archaisms irritating at times, his tales were unequalled for genuine atmosphere. Something of the same enchanting quality was inherent in Williamson's 'The Moon Era', which reflected his early fascination with Merritt.

Yet, of those twenty-three American writers who responded to my appeals, only thirteen actually got a showing in the magazine before it became a war casualty. That I had amassed such an amount of material was due to the prospect of more frequent publication which was seriously considered early in 1939, together with a proposal for a regular series of sf novels. But materialisation of these plans, which would have ensured the continued development of British science fiction throughout the war years, became more remote as the war clouds began to gather, to be discarded altogether on the grounds of declining sales and the extra cost of production involved.

The outbreak of war did not, however, put an instant stopper on publication as I half-expected. As in the case of many other magazines, the effect of the blackout on other activities was such as to give a fillip to sales, and copies of the last few issues were at a premium. But for two years paper rationing whittled down the contents,

slowly but relentlessly, from 128 to 72 pages, while I wrote consoling editorials thanking providence for our survival. For the sake of economy, a permanent cover design was adopted, allowing for the main contents of each issue to be printed in a panel. This device—or the design—came in for severe criticism.

Towards the end, when paper restrictions became more ruthless, we could never be certain if the issue we were putting to press would actually emerge. The Army, too, had intervened. For No. 15, my editorial office was a table in a NAAFI canteen at Tidworth. Then I found myself in my own cosy little room in the servants' quarters of the officers' mess, where the last issue was produced. In this (Spring 1942) issue I was able to feature a brand-new novelette by Benson Herbert, 'The Earth Shall Die!' and introduce a new writer, Marion F. Eadie.

She was a Glasgow fan who became the wife of Manchester fan-artist Harry Turner, who did the interior illustrations for the magazine—at fees which today would not cover the cost of his materials. I was given approval to commission him only after I had protested the efforts of the blockmaker's artist in the second issue, and the old-fashioned tailpieces with which the printers filled the white space at the ends of stories. Even then, I had to re-use line-blocks whenever I could, and none was ever bigger than a quarter-page.

I was only too aware that Turner's first drawings betrayed his inexperience; but they were vastly preferable to outlandish friezes of swans and fishes, and something that seemed to have strayed from a Church Missionary Society pamphlet. Come the eleventh (Summer 1940) issue, his work had improved so much that he was given a chance to do the cover, illustrating readers' notions of *The World of Tomorrow*. But publisher Roberts didn't care for it and was emphatic in denying him a second opportunity.

It was only to be expected that, when Newnes at length took the plunge with *Fantasy*, the better rates they offered should attract some of *ToW*'s contributors—and artist Turner, who illustrated two articles by America's Willy Ley. Incidentally, I had earlier been obliged to turn down, with almost abject apologies, an offering by Ley on space-travel because it was not so much an article as an abstruse scientific paper. I asked him for something more digestible, but didn't get it... *Fantasy* did.

It was B.I.S. founder Phil Cleator, however, who authored the inevitable piece on space-travel in the first issue—which, in spite of *The World's Work* having tested the ice, proved to be another 'one-shot'. Eight months went by before No. 2 showed up, in March 1939; and it was not until the end of July that a third issue was published, carrying the announcement that the magazine would appear quarterly, and looking forward guardedly to eventual monthly publication. A month before No. 4 was due out, however, the war was upon us and Newnes' *Fantasy* became a collectors' item.

In the S.F.A. journal *Tomorrow*, editor T. Stanhope Spragg explained the middle-of-the-road policy the new



Artist S. R. Drigin's cover for the first issue of *Fantasy*, illustrating 'Menace of the Metal-Men' by Italian author A. Prestigiacomo.

magazine was to adopt from the start:

...A good story, well written, and an imaginative theme with a scientific interest that is something more than a peg upon which to hang an adventure, is the formula to which the contents... subscribe.

British publishers' lack of enterprise in the science fiction field has often been deplored by members of the S.F.A. in their demand for magazines comparable with those produced in the United States. In *Fantasy*, a leading British publishing house now seeks to supply that demand to the best of its ability.

And it was up to the fans, by their criticisms and suggestions, 'to ensure that this new enterprise is directed along the right lines to become a worthy representative of British science fiction.' Which I thought was fair enough. Indeed, there was no more avid reader of *Fantasy's Critical Commentary* than the editor of *Tales of Wonder*.

To me, the most obvious difference between the two magazines was the superior layout and illustration of *Fantasy*, which was attractive without being over-bright. I did not care for the style of staff artists S. R. Drigin and G. Blow, who were manifestly more at home with airplanes than with spaceships, and whose work was too



A detail from an illustration by Drigin for 'Menace of the Metal-Men,' featured in the first issue of *Fantasy*.

often reminiscent of *Scoops*; but at least they had room to manoeuvre, with double-page spreads and all.

The cover story of No. 1, 'Menace of the Metal-Men', was by an Italian engineer named A. Prestigiacomo. It was some time later that I discovered where and when it had been published before—in the English *Argosy* in 1933 when it was titled 'Zed Eight'. On the cover of No. 2 we recognised our old friend Giant Caterpillar of 'Winged Terror', the *Pearson's Magazine* serial to which I had drawn the editor's attention over two years previously. Except that (as Maurice Hugi pointed out in a letter) the multi-legged monster was about four times the size which the author specified—and, in my judgment, not half so well drawn as on the Pearson's cover.

Fearn, of course, was well to the fore in the first issue—with what must have been the simplest story he ever wrote, about a scientist who found the secret of invisibility and, posing as a visiting Martian, did the Indian rope trick in Trafalgar Square. But he more than made up for it in No. 2 with 'Climatica', in which Britain's achievement of a perfect climate had world-wide repercussions. John Beynon and Eric Frank Russell appeared in all three issues, Beynon coping the cover of the last with 'Derelict of Space'. He also contributed 'Child of Power' under the name of Wyndham Parkes—which suggested the pseudonym John Wyndham with which he finally won international fame.

(The next article in this fascinating series will deal with the juvenile weekly *Modern Wonder*, and with other developments in the science fiction field both before and during the war.)



FANTASY REVIEW

THE FLESHPOTS OF SANSATO

By William F. Temple

Published by New English Library

Reviewed by Kathryn Buckley

The controversy which has been raging between 'New' and 'Old' wave science fiction has undoubtedly splintered the genre into categories so that one can no longer be sure that readers of science fiction have interests in common beyond an interest in 'speculating'. It has become necessary now to define what kind of science fiction is being discussed and there is, unfortunately, an inference that 'New' is better than 'Old'.

In part this is unavoidable since usage of the word 'new' frequently means 'better' as a study of television commercials proclaiming new and better than never before and new and improved products will illustrate. Before long both these terms will be meaningless, if they have not already become so.

Being an antonym for new 'old' infers tired and worn out and this is a pity because it could tend to stultify the market for what I prefer to call 'traditional' science fiction. Tradition is that which has withstood the test of time and been reworked to achieve a kind of permanence, and all literature is influenced by it, whether we realise it or not. It is probable that more traditional science fiction is successful in that it does what it sets out to do, than New Wave.

THE FLESHPOTS OF SANSATO succeeds admirably as a traditional science fiction spy/detective story. Earth competes with other planets in the Galaxy under handicap, like everyone else, to the Darians, a sort of

benevolent super master race, who possess the Transporter or 'possibility shift'. The Darians hire out their Transports to other races but will only allow them to be used one way, thus giving their competitors a kind of charitable half-leg-up. Rather like the Americans allowing one way travel on supersonic jets, the return by sailing boat.

Alexander Lowry, an eminent scientist, has disappeared whilst on the verge of discovering this secret in Sansato, a kind of galactic latin quarter of the planet Montefor. Ray Garner is blackmailed into taking another trip to Montefor to find the missing scientist, with a deadline of one month.

William F. Temple uses an unobtrusive, mellow smooth style, drawing on a wider cultural background than many routine sf novels, which nonetheless unfolds a tense and exciting story. Without being pornographic, he manages to draw a fascinating variety of Satos, the future equivalent of Geisha girls. There is Noyce, tantalising and invisible, who wanted to exist as a person in her own right, Electric Ella in her Ivory tower flying her kite, Lybore the Cat Woman and Maughrie the 'Happy One'.

Although each of the Satos seems to pinpoint a particular aspect of female nature, they are more than stock caricatures. Perhaps the main strength of this book is the fact that most of the characters are that much more alive than they are in the average sf spy/detective story. This feeling is enhanced by the author's cryptic philosophical jabs, which are sometimes acutely perceptive, and have a comforting sense ring about them.

For example, some remarks on a Psychedelic trip, which could be just as relevant to today: '... You see, you aren't alone really. You're 'At One' with the universe, the Life Force flows through all things—just as it animated your teddy-bear and your toy soldiers when you were a child... Indeed, you are a child again. You've recaptured that lost sense of wonder.' and later 'So you're an ant, and the ant is you. And the pebble is the mountain is an egg is Mount Sansato is eternal re-birth. And Life is a Great Becoming. You've solved the riddle of the universe.' Mystic religions may think they have all the answers but the rationalist must be sure he isn't swapping illusion for reality.

Maughrie, despite the confusion created in the mind of the reader due to her supposed lack of memory, serves to put across some astringent comment: 'So our ancestors, the Hippies, tried to put the brake on Time itself. Time must have a stop... Freeze the present, hold fast to it, never let go. If they created an Everlasting Now, the dreaded future would be kept at bay... Maughrie's only a leftover from that age. An Anachronism. Afraid of the past and afraid of the future.' Maughrie would have had more impact if the author had not confused lack of memory (she very obviously has memory) with a conviction that the past and future were irrelevant.

Although Bill Temple shows that he can be very inventive and most of the seduction scenes are highly entertaining, for some odd reason his imagination seems to have left him when he came to the character of Vygynia, an autistic 'child' of 26.

Autism is of course a condition which has only been diagnosed comparatively recently and derives its name from the natural state through which all babies pass when they are unable to distinguish objects from people but perceive the world as a kind of fantasy environment. Using this real condition in a future imaginative world jarred inasmuch as it wasn't invented and therefore required a high degree of accuracy to portray it convincingly. It is possible that this condition has been obscured by other factors such as brain damage (currently there is controversy over whether it is caused by some unidentified brain damage or an early but severe emotional disorder) but whilst very little is known, certain facts have been observed.

Autistic children usually have a higher than average I.Q. and because of this have a lot of spare kinetic energy to get rid of. One of their characteristics is the contact they establish with objects—not people—which they spin or manipulate with considerable dexterity often for hours at a time. The danger of using an identifiable condition is that the author must make it identifiable for it to be convincing and I am puzzled as to why the author found it necessary to call Vygynia's condition 'autism'. He is quite ingenious enough to have found another name and acknowledged its similarity to a condition known as autism. This would have left him free to make far more imaginative use of the character by say locking the vital information in an object which

became vital to her and might be the first step to cure. Both Garner and Monicelli would then have been faced with a strong moral dilemma. As it was I found this character broke my 'suspension of disbelief'.

There are some very imaginative touches in the background, particularly in the history of Sansato and the details of the delights and dangers awaiting the tourist. Although in the early sections of the book much of the information is conveyed en masse this is fortunately saved from being ponderous by Bill Temple's inimitable light humorous touch and the deft abandon with which he juggles philosophical clichés.

In short this is the sort of traditionally structured story, with a beginning a middle and an end which will always be popular. Science fiction has many authors who are very much over-rated and a few who are under-rated. Bill Temple falls into the latter category.

JIREL OF JOIRY

By C. L. Moore

Paperback Library 63-166, 176 pages, 60 cents.

Reviewed by John Foyster

The stories in this collection all first appeared over thirty years ago (*in Weird Tales*), so one might expect them to seem a little cobwebbed. That this is not so says much for C. L. Moore's talents, though these are also evident in her many later fine stories and indeed in these stories themselves. Perhaps it is worth noting that Joanna Russ's stories of Alyx, which are very recent, have some things in common with the stories of Jirel.

Probably most science fiction readers will have come across one or more of these magic/alternate universe/sword and sorcery yarns in other collections of C. L. Moore's, such as 'Shambleau And Others', but here we have five of them, and although there are some similarities in the plots of these five, it could probably be claimed with equal accuracy that these are threads holding the whole piece together.

Nevertheless it is true that to some extent these stories are monotonous. For example, to avoid the problem of Jirel being both warrior and lady, C. L. Moore simply tells us about Jirel's more warlike activities, but her ladylike attributes are on display within the action of the story.

For the most part the stories are written in Standard Archaic, but this is almost unobtrusive. And although there is a tendency towards the 'indescribable horror' school of description this is never excessive and almost always well-done.

The only feature of the stories which is perhaps a fault is the way in which Jirel frequently finds herself in a position of great danger, does not know how to get out of it, yet is somehow spirited away by some off-stage power. It may be that this was a feature of pulp fiction at the time when these stories were published, for then it was certainly true for many people that this was the only possible salvation.

Five stories, all good, and sufficiently varied to make it worth plunging immediately into the next.



SCIENCE FICTION YEARBOOK Number 3

Popular Library, Inc., 96 pages, 50 cents.

Reviewed by John Foyster

Since 1964 I have had to spend quite a part of each year on tenterhooks wondering whether Popular Library will continue its practice of producing an annual anthology from the pages of the science fiction magazines whose departure I most regret, *Startling Stories* and *Thrilling Wonder Stories*. For the past six years I've been lucky (and so have the people who have bought and read *their* copies), but how long can it go on?

The first three in the series were titled 'Treasury of Great Science Fiction Stories', and of these the first two were interesting, if unimaginative, collections. With authors like Bradbury, Kuttner, Asimov, Brackett, Heinlein and so on to draw upon, there was, and still is, obviously no lack of good fiction. But the third in that series, the 1966 volume, seems to me to have been somewhat ahead of the others. The books are all pulp size, with stiff covers, and on the inside covers, starting with the '66 volume, illustrations by Virgil Finlay were reproduced. This has continued to the present, although one illustration was used twice, in 1967 and again in 1968. The 1969 volume sees Finlay on the outside cover as well.

This use of illustrations is important, because Finlay was, for many years, almost a trademark for *Startling* and *Thrilling Wonder*. His drawing suited the magazines admirably, just as Kelly Freas's work has always been just right for *Astounding/Analog*. This means that the reader attracted by the cover (or an interior illustration) will find the stories to his taste.

It isn't enough just to use someone's drawings, of course, and the selection of stories from a couple of hundred issues of the magazines must also be carefully done. This is where the 1969 volume is not quite up to the standard of the past, and certainly not up to the

standard of *Startling Stories*. While it contains stories by Asimov, Brackett, Kuttner, de Camp, Knight and Wyndham (to name only a few), none of those stories was the author's best, nor anything like *Startling's* best. It is only necessary to look at the contents page of the 1965 anthology, 'The Shape of Things' (edited by Damon Knight from the same source) to see what can be done. Philip Jose Farmer's 'Sail On! Sail On!' for instance, is a truly remarkable story which hasn't been used. In fact, none of Farmer's several stories have been chosen, while such big names as Verne Chute and Leslie Bigelow have. Let's hope that 1969 is just a temporary lapse. And what sort of lapse is this? Well, to some readers it may not seem much of a lapse at all: the authors, or rather some of them, have been listed already, and you don't see groups like that in magazines any more. Let's see what these stories are like.

Isaac Asimov's 'Button, Button' is a funny little sketch provided that you don't look at it too closely. Henry Kuttner's quite good 'Silent Eden' suffers from being too short, while Damon Knight's 'Definition' lacks just that. No one is going to complain about these three stories, but no one is going to write home about them either. Though it was published in 1951, Robert Moore Williams's story is just primitive: and it isn't up to the company it keeps.

Since I think Leigh Brackett can do no wrong I shall have merely to say that 'The Demons of Darkside' is not one of her better stories. It certainly does not compare with her 'The Queer Ones'.

And though it is the longest story in the book, L. Sprague de Camp's 'The Guided Man' is just not sufficiently worked out. I suppose that, if anything, this was one of the weaknesses of the fiction in *Startling*—that too often it was the result of superficial treatment of a good idea—but in the case of this story this seems to be carried to extremes.

Margaret St. Clair's story is too slight to be discussed here, but Edmond Hamilton's 'The Unforgiven' shows what is perhaps the better side of Hamilton's work—the side far away from Captain Future. It isn't a great story (it is too short) but it is good.

The last four stories, by Kendell Foster Crossen, John Wyndham, Robert Bloch and Miriam Allen de Ford are uniformly unremarkable, all relying on rather slight gimmicks.

The overall verdict is a difficult one. Clearly there are some worthwhile stories in here. There are also some unimportant ones. Again, this collection is not nearly so good as previous ones, nor is it as good as it could have been (Popular Library is not yet scraping the bottom of the barrel for material). Overall it is worth buying, but not as worthwhile as its earlier companions. Next year will probably be better.

And who knows—eventually the sales may be sufficiently encouraging for Popular to start buying new stories. I don't think they'll ever have letter columns like they used to again, though.

John Foyster

*The gulf
between the
stars
drove men mad
. . . but
interstellar
travel went on!*

Sydney J. Bounds

LIMBO RIDER

Klaxons wailed their shocking note through the long reaches of the starship *Ganges*. Indicators flashed neon-red: TOTAL EMERGENCY! Two hundred and fifty pairs of volunteer colonists felt immense relief, a welcome slackening of almost unbearable tension.

In the bleakly neutral control room, the same relief was tempered by fear.

'Space-time shunt and replacement out,' First Officer Finch reported.

'I know that,' Commander Jameson said irritably. 'Check it through. What's the fault? Can one of them be repaired? How long will it take?'

The commander, a thick-set figure, turned deliberately from the rows of tell-tales, computer outlet and power board to face the observation window. He stared out, fingers locked behind his rigid back. Where, moments before, had been an opaque nothing, was now a humbling expanse of interstellar space tinged with a faint far-off haze of stars. Too far off, he reflected grimly; they'd never make it.

'Navigator, calculate course and time for the nearest star. Mister Finch, mount a guard over hydroponics and recycling tanks.'

He gazed stolidly at the stars. It seemed weeks since



he'd last seen them and they now seemed unreal. It's not fair, he thought, and rebuked himself; self-pity wasn't going to help deal with the situation.

Behind him, the Engineer's voice sounded sullen: 'Shunt and replacement both fused solid, sir—no hope even of cannibalising parts.'

Jameson nodded as if that were the answer he'd been expecting and spoke with a note of bitterness: 'So much for automation. If the replacement hadn't been switched in automatically, we'd have had time to find and clear the fault. Now we're in the hands of the nuts.'

A silence began, a lasting silence in which a new kind of tension built.

Finch broke it. 'At least we don't have the voices any more.'

Light-years away, a single red lamp glowed beside the name *Ganges* in the headquarters of Rescue Flight Service. It was a long room, quiet except for the soft purr of computer and air-conditioning, empty except for the Director of Operations and duty technician.

The Director, lanky, grey-haired, stood before the indicator board, staring at the solitary red lamp amid the rows of greens. Without moving, without expression he somehow gave the appearance of being a harassed man as he waited for Dr. Oren.

When Oren broke the seal on the air-tight door the Director said, not lifting his gaze from the red lamp: 'I want a pilot.'

Oren, neatly built with a slim-line moustache, nodded. The Director always wanted a pilot; he had forgotten the number of times he had been summoned to this room to hear the same demand. It was Oren's job to have a pilot on call. Not an easy job.

'The *Ganges* is back in space-time,' the Director said, knitting a frown. 'That means time affects them. How much time I wish I knew. I just wish somebody—anybody—knew.'

Oren nodded politely. He had enough trouble with the pilots; let the Director worry over mathematical abstractions.

'One point, doctor, I'll need the pilot's file. Rescue Flight will carry a new instrument—maybe it'll give us some degree of control.'

And maybe it won't, Oren thought. Nothing had so far. Rescue Flights were hit-or-miss affairs; mainly misses.

'Anyway, it's something to try,' the Director ended hopefully.

Oren nodded a third time and went quietly to sort out his pilot.

The lounge was airy and tastefully furnished, French windows opening to a view across placid blue water to pine-studded hills that rose to scenic mountains. The parkland surrounds exuded the kind of peace that goes with unlimited wealth and leisure. Sunlight warmed veranda seats, dazzled off the crisp white uniforms of attendants.

Pilots gathered in the lounge as if a sixth sense had warned them of an impending flight. They were a varied bunch. One stood hunched in a corner, head cocked like a bird, listening with immense concentration. Another paced the inches-thick carpet, muttering to himself; not strictly to himself, but to no-one physically present.

The others lacked co-ordination in one way or another, consequently their dialogue tended towards cross-talk. Only on one thing were they agreed; they didn't like the failures. Failures were one of those things. They happened, and could only be shrugged off.

'My last trip,' announced one with a sense of importance, 'I rode with God at my shoulder.'

'A nut,' another commented. 'A real nut, I mean,' he added hastily.

Larry Comber felt good. He had the feeling this was going to be his trip as he looked round the room, studying faces, lips, gestures, mannerisms. All the pilots knew each other well; the only time they left the Centre was when one took a trip.

Some showed almost total withdrawal, others relived previous flights. He sensed strongly that he was the most co-ordinated person in the room. Not that he was perfectly in control; it took considerable effort to play it cool. But it had to be his. It was some time since he'd been out and he wanted the flight.

He made a smile and wore it across his seamed nut-brown face, a jockey-sized man with empty blue eyes. You might have thought he was one of the attendants until you looked into his eyes; this was one of his good days.

Remember to face Oren, he thought, stare him down. Let him know I'm back on the reality jag, strong. Confidence radiated from him as the doctor stepped quietly into the room.

Oren was Flight Service's top psychiatrist, and he was good. He'd been doing this job for a decade and, just looking round, he could safely discount most of the pilots for this trip.

The few eager ones crowded him.

'Never felt fitter, doc.'

'How about me?'

They wanted the trip: fine. That mattered, but it wasn't enough. He needed a man who could be counted on to last out the flight—a flight that took no time at all. One who would keep the rescue mission in mind and arrive at the rendezvous. Sometimes a reward helped...

Oren chatted, not so idly, making his preliminary selection. Routine tests eliminated more. Then the not so routine.

Three he sent to Medical for a check-out. They gave him one back. Comber.

'Well, Larry, how d'you feel about it now? Think you can keep your mind on the *Ganges* all the way?'

Comber wore his alert expression. 'Sure, sure I can.'

Oren sat in silence for some moments. He suppressed a sigh; never satisfied with his choice, he could only select from the men available.

'Tell you what, Larry,' he said quietly. 'Make a good rendezvous and you can idle back.'

Comber's eyes brightened as he got the message.

Oren stood up to leave. 'All right, Larry, you're the pilot this trip. Blast-off will be as soon as the Director has a ship prepared for you.'

Aboard *Ganges*, bumbling through the interstellar void at less than light-speed, Jameson's hands knotted as he sighted on the nearest star. No Earth-type planet. They were forced to go on, searching for a haven. He felt pain in his hands and loosened his grip.

First Officer Finch said. 'They're not liking the rationing, commander.'

'They'll like it even less when I make a further cut.'

Jameson continued to stare out at the stars, feeling himself age. Five hundred colonists on a journey that, without the shunt, would take years of real time. He had no idea how many years, but too many. They'd die of old age if they didn't starve first. He shivered.

They could only wait for Rescue Flight to get through to them, wait and live on their nerves, wait helpless to help themselves. They'd never make planetfall in time without a new shunt, never . . .

Finch's voice came, nervously: 'Suppose the nut does get here in time—will we be able to face the voices again?'

Jameson preferred not to think about that. His back stiffened. Time to tighten discipline, he decided.

Comber sat in the pilot's chair in the nose cone of a Rescue Flight ship, waiting for Go. He had nothing to do yet and his inner tension mounted till he felt screwed up. Soon he would be out there again. Soon now.

A natural cunning kept his eyes bright, the alert expression in place; he knew that Oren and the Director watched him over a tele link-up.

The automatic countdown was near its end. The nuclear rocket engine was hot. A counter clicked off seconds: *Three. Two. One...*

The ship lifted, cut a swath through Earth's atmosphere, accelerating. The moon grew brighter, larger, then shrank away from him. Red Mars loomed up. He lifted above the plane of the asteroid belt, headed out past the gas giants to lonely Pluto and beyond.

All lights green. Any minute now, he thought greedily.

The Director's voice cut in above the computer-hum: 'Recap on your mission, pilot.'

'Rendezvous *Ganges*. Pass them the spare shunt.'

'Where is the spare shunt?'

'In my cabin locker.' He tapped it lightly with a finger.

A pause, then—'Okay. Cut in your shunt, and rendezvous.'

Comber's hand closed about a conspicuous red handle. His skin itched and joy filled him. He looked one last time at the stars, despising them; then he closed the shunt.

The stars vanished and he was surrounded by an opaque nothing. He was beyond space and time.

Immediately, the voices crowded in on him:

'It's been a long time,' someone was saying, the voice in Comber's head, a voice that could not be shut out.

'Boring. When will the voyage end?'

'Never. Not for the lost.'

Another voice over-rode them, a voice that was almost a shriek: 'Get me out! Get me out of here!' It repeated over and over endlessly. It could never have an end now. The voice of one of those who realised something had gone wrong.

It was joined by a bitter voice cursing Immigration, the inventor of the space-time shunt, the engineers who'd built it. The long stream of invective didn't stop. It would never stop. But sheer repetition dulled its obscenity. Though the shrieking voice never lost its ability to penetrate.

Other voices joined the clamour; the tormented; the suspicious.

Comber slid gradually into their world, a world that knew neither matter nor light, distance nor time. The world of the lost, the damned. *Limbo*. Comber, the Limbo Rider.

He could take it, he reflected with pride. The normals couldn't. Only a schizo could take Limbo trip after trip.

He went slack in his chair, listening in, remembering it all from before; the endless dialogue like a needle stuck in a groove, unchanging. Spittle drooled from his open mouth.

'Darling, we shan't have to limit our family now.'

'Better wait and see what conditions are when we set down—'

They never would. Not now.

They were the living dead, the ghost voices of Limbo. Somewhere they still lived, if you could call it living, lost in a meaningless existence outside space and time.

Colonisation of the stars was impracticable in ships travelling below light-speed. A mathematician devised an equation to take a ship outside the limit of space-time; an engineer applied it. Desperate men tested it.

And, suddenly, the human race exploded over the galaxy, colonists looking for new worlds. Inevitably there were still bugs in the Space-time Shunt—failures. The victims stayed in Limbo.

But experiments went on until the shunt was fully mastered, when star travel became routine. With it, a ship took only months of real time to reach its destination.

The galaxy steadily filled with men.

Now there was a second snag. Men found they couldn't take a second trip. Now the starships were haunted by those lost on earlier flights, lost beyond recovery because no-one understood what had happened to them. No-one knew how to reach them.

Neither dead, nor living, they remained frozen in the stasis of Null-time. Their voices echoed psychically

through the non-existence that was Limbo, inhabiting the skulls of all subsequent voyagers.

Nothing had been discovered that would shut out the voices. Neither sleep nor drugs. The voices made star-travel a nightmare that no sane person could take a second time. So the crew of each ship was drafted from its own colonists, trained for a one-way flight. They arrived, set down, and stayed.

Only the Specials, the Rescue Flight Service pilots, could survive repeated trips in Limbo.

Larry Comber was a Special, a full-blooded schizophrenic, accustomed to hearing voices in his head from childhood and accepting Limbo as his own kind of reality; identifying with the lost ones, getting to know them as old friends who could be relied on. They didn't change. Change implies time and there was no time in Limbo.

From a Service point of view, schizos were a bad risk; but there simply wasn't anybody else to do the job. They became the blue-eyed boys of the starways and no doctor attempted to cure them. They were too few and far too valuable.

Comber sat in his chair, listening to the voices:

'Bishop takes pawn.'

They'd play that game till the universe ran down.

'Starship Van Diemen calling. Anybody out there hear me?'

'I hear you,' Comber answered happily. The radio operator aboard the Van Diemen was an old friend. He had many old friends in Limbo.

Like Lena, coming in strong and clear. A sultry voice, calling to mind a dusky skin and big lungs. All the pilots played favourite, and she was Comber's.

Her voice oozed sex-appeal as she conned some loverman.

'Way out yonder, all by mahself... want some lovin', man? Let's get integrated...'

Comber's mind slipped; he imagined himself aboard that starship, in her cabin. He was that man she wanted.

'Wrestle me, big feller... make poetry...'

He slid deeper into reverie, mission forgotten. The Rescue Flight ship deviated from its course, began to drift away from the *Ganges*. Comber floated deep down in a dream-world, sharing Limbo life with a husky-voiced girl who wanted love more than life itself.

The ship drifted through a tideless nothing, without purpose, not even a schizo in command now.

Far away, back in real time, real space, Oren sighed: 'We've lost him.'

The Director tightened his lips, opened them. 'Gives us a chance to see if the new instrument works. If not, goodbye, *Ganges*.'

'How does it work? If it does...'

'Pre-programmed, with an automatic cut-in triggered by a chemical change in Comber's brain.'

They waited—

Comber, sharing Lena's cabin, frowned. How could he be with her when he still heard her voice coming

from a distance? The sing-song lilt of her voice was unmistakable, so he hadn't located her yet. He wanted very much to find her, be with her.

'Dig me, daddy-O... make with the jazz.'

He stirred himself, changed course to follow the elusive siren-song. Somewhere, at the back of his mind, the vague memory of mission stirred; but that wasn't as important as finding Lena. He began to search.

There was a strange echo, something he hadn't noticed before. It was as if there were two voices, Lena and her doppleganger. He followed the stronger of the two, followed her rich ghost-voice for what passed as eternity in timeless Limbo, never quite catching up with her. She drifted away from him and he followed, gaining but slowly.

He kept doggedly on. He would catch her, he must...

When it seemed he had at last made contact, her voice cut out abruptly; involuntarily, his mind snapped back to reality. *Rendezvous*. He remembered now, and his hand closed on the shunt lever, opened it.

Stars flooded his observation window, the terrifying vastness of interstellar space. The shadow of the *Ganges* loomed above him. He clamped to her hull, magnetically; a lock opened and a crewman waited there. Comber passed over the spare shunt.

He waited, and now time had a meaning. He stared out at the universe, cold and empty, and wished it would go away. The frigid silence frightened him and he switched on the radio for company.

'This is your commander,' a voice said. 'The nut was successful. We have our new shunt and it is being fitted at this moment. We are going on. The ship's distillery is now functioning and everyone is invited to—'

Get drunk, Comber thought. It was a smart move. Drunk, they might stand the voices a second time, long enough to reach their designated world.

He listened a while, thinking: somehow he'd been tricked. That doppleganger of Lena had brought him to rendezvous...

Presently, *Ganges* winked out. One moment it loomed over him, vast against the stars; the next it was gone.

Comber's hand grasped the red handle. Idle back, Oren had said; that was the kind of reward he appreciated. Idling with his old friends, the changeless ones.

He closed the shunt and the voices returned:

'Get me out of here!'

'Boring.'

'Darling, we shan't—'

'Bishop takes pawn.'

'Van Diemen calling—'

He listened for Lena, searched for her, confident there would be no doppleganger effect on the return trip. It was good to be a Limbo Rider, way out beyond space and time. This was really living. Here he felt free.

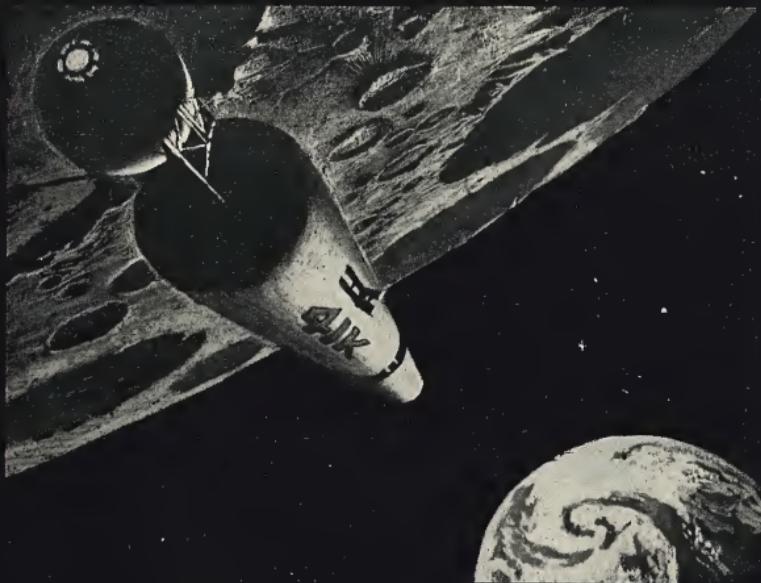
Joy filled him as Lena's sultry voice echoed through his head: 'Want some lovin', man? Move in!'

'I hear you,' Larry Comber answered happily. 'I'm coming!'

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The days were hot and dry, and water—brackish, sulphurous—was rationed. The food was barely adequate. The overseers carried whips as well as firearms. Life was a monotony of blistering day after blistering day, bitterly cold night after bitterly cold night. Men died. J43—he had been manager of a State grocery—broke away from the gang and ran off into the desert. Nobody tried to stop him. Some time later his workmates were shown his mummified body . . .

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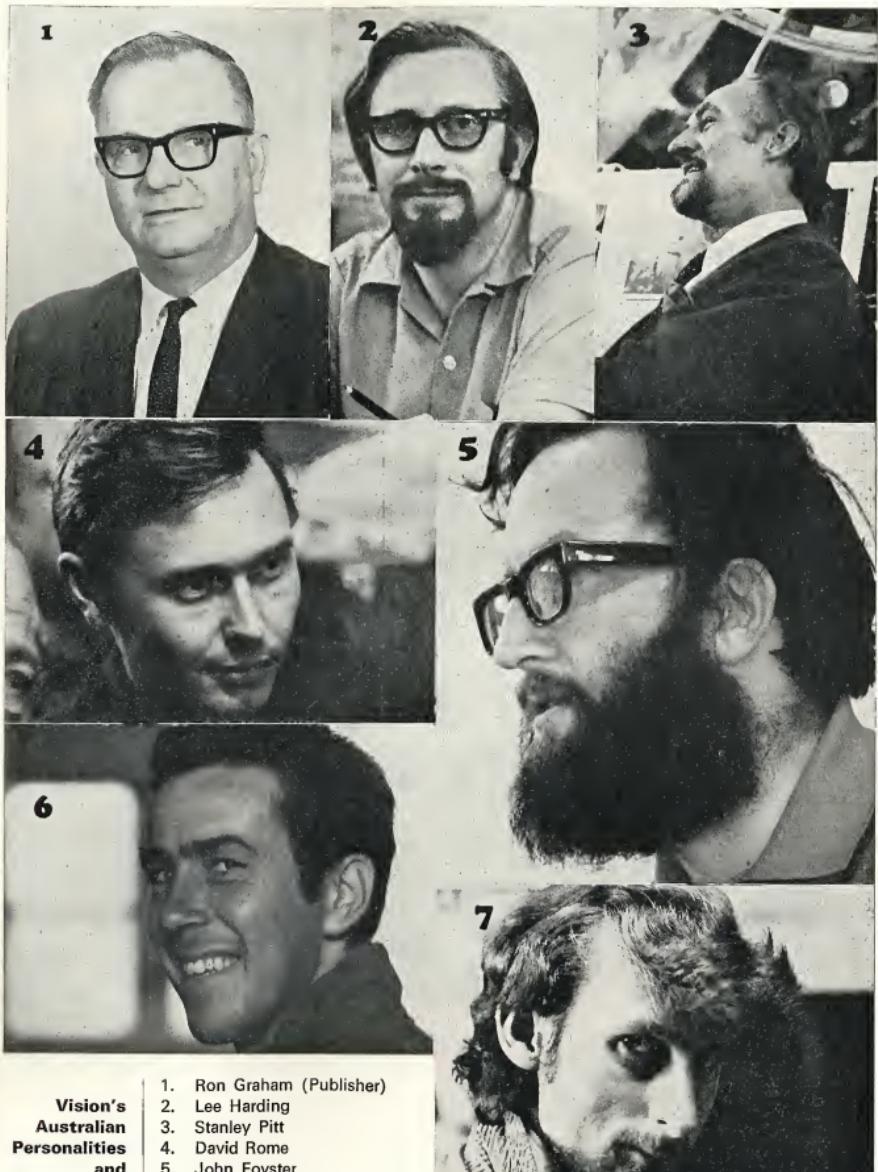
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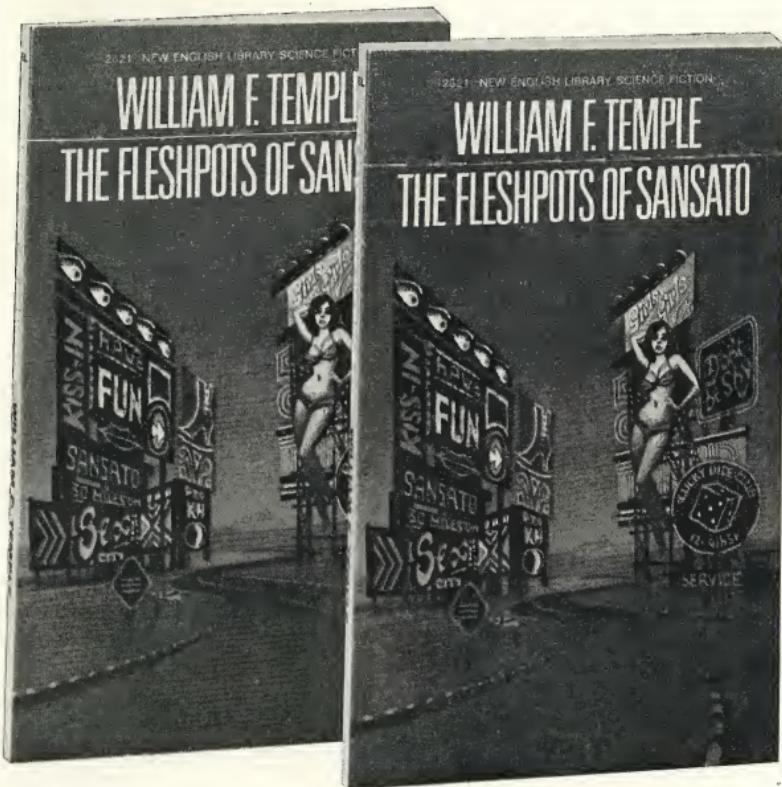


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